

interzone

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book reviews

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INTERFACE

FICTION



COVER ART

BEACON by RICHARD WAGNER (email: rwagnerenon@att.net)

REVIEWS



LAVIE TIDHAR



ANSIBLE LINK by DAVID LANGFORD 2-3

news, obituaries

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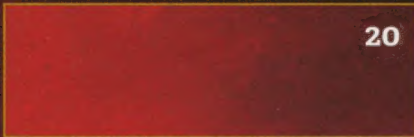
4

A TIME FOR RAVEN
STEPHEN KOTOWYCH 4-9
illustrated by Richard Wagner



10

THE EVER-DREAMING VERDICT OF PLAGUES
JASON SANFORD 10-19
illustrated by Jim Burns
alisoneldred.com/artistJimBurns.html



20

THE METAPHOR
FIONA MOORE 20-23



24

THE FALL OF THE CITY OF SILVER
JON INGOLD 24-33
illustrated by Martin Hanford
martinhanford1974.deviantart.com



34

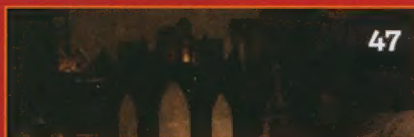
TETHERED
MERCURIO D. RIVERA 34-43
illustrated by Ben Baldwin
benbaldwin.co.uk

MORE BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS IN BLACK STATIC ttapress.com/blackstatic



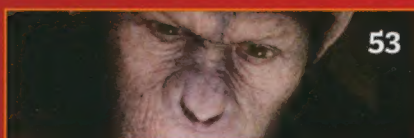
44

BOOK ZONE 44-51
books: Osama, Dangerous Waters, The Urban Fantasy Anthology, Robocalypse, The Book of Transformations, Queen of Kings, The Testament of Jessie Lamb, Never Never Stories, Future Media



47

MUTANT POPCORN by NICK LOWE 52-56
cinema: Conan the Barbarian, Cowboys & Aliens, Rise of the Planet of the Apes, Arietty, Kung Fu Panda 2, Cars 2, Transformers, Super 8, Harry Potter, Captain America, Spy Kids



53

LASER FODDER by TONY LEE 57-64
discs: Twilight Zone, Source Code, Chris Marker, Vampire Diaries, SGU, Supernatural, Insidious, Julia's Eyes, Eureka, 51, Quatermass and the Pit, Warehouse 13, Muckman, Cannibal Holocaust, 2001 Nights, Round Up



63

Waiting for Whedon

Even in the strangest realms of genre cinema and science fiction TV, quality entertainment has become an increasingly rare commodity. There's a lot of passable telefantasy about, but for movies on disc it's harder than ever to find anything that is not a sequel or a remake or entirely derivative. In today's media, 'new' does not equal 'original'. More often than not, 'new' means 3D! Whether fandom likes it or not, the recycled past has all but overcome the present, and future SF seems doomed to repeat 1950s disasters (Stephen Sommers' *When Worlds Collide* anyone?), while distinctly unchallenging projects like *The Thing* prequel, a live-action *Akira*, and mooted reboots for *Dune*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Videodrome* continue to mine the 1980s era for 'previously owned' material.

The hotly anticipated May 2012 launch of *The Avengers* looks ready to appeal to all. Will this assembly of science fetish, hi-tech weapons and modernised myths succeed in merging the bizarre diversity of Hulk, Iron Man, Thor and Captain America? What works in comics (of inspirational champions) usually adapts without grace, but films based on comic books dominate genre horizons, and those creative approaches which produced *The Dark Knight* and Ang Lee's *Hulk* showed us that superhero cinema can be spectacular, serious drama. Writer-director Joss Whedon's finest work so far has been the TV shows *Angel* and *Dollhouse*, wherein his favoured scenarios present weird/dysfunctional 'families', not a mainly progressive democratic authority (Geoff Johns' recent *The Avengers: World Trust* temporarily put superheroes into global politics), which made "Earth's mightiest heroes" so different from other super groups such as the family centred *Fantastic 4*, or persecuted 'outlaws' of the *X-Men*. If *The Avengers*' film plot focuses on Nick Fury's SHIELD agency, Whedon's unique blockbuster could perform well as an A-team building franchise effort of meta-humans on home-world security duties – taking essential cues from both Mark Miller's *The Ultimates* milieu and Stan Lee's 1963 *Avengers* debut. The advertised cast of characters includes Maria Hill and Hawkeye (no sign of Ant-Man and the Wasp, though). Marvel fanboy purists may dislike that, on principle. I'd just like to see a heli-carrier above New York.

Tony Lee

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



As Others See Us. On *Another Earth*: '...sounds like a science-fiction movie, but it's not. Yes, it features the appearance in the sky of an Earth identical to our own, one populated by doppelgangers [...] And yes, the dialogue sometimes bandies about concepts like synchronicity (sometimes annoyingly so). / But more than anything, the metaphysics function as a metaphor...' Which is of course unknown in sf. (*Globe & Mail*)

Hugo Awards. Novel: Connie Willis, *Blackout/All Clear*. Novella: Ted Chiang, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects*. Novelette: Allen M. Steele, 'The Emperor of Mars' (*Asimov's* 6/10). Short Story: Mary Robinette Kowal, 'For Want of a Nail' (*Asimov's* 9/10). Related Work: Lynne M. Thomas and Tara O'Shea, ed., *Chicks Dig Time Lords: A Celebration of Doctor Who by the Women Who Love It*. Graphic Story: Phil and Kaja Foglio, *Girl Genius, Volume 10: Agatha Heterodyne and the Guardian Muse*. Dramatic, Long: *Inception*. Dramatic, Short: *Doctor Who*, 'The Pandorica Opens'/'The Big Bang'. Editor, Short: Sheila Williams. Editor, Long: Lou Anders. Pro Artist: Shaun Tan. Semiprozine: *Clarkesworld*. Fanzine: *The Drink Tank*. Fan Writer: Claire Brialey. Fan Artist: Brad W. Foster. John W. Campbell Award: Lev Grossman. These were presented at the 2011 World SF Convention in Reno, where site selection voting chose (unsurprisingly since there was no opposing bid) San Antonio, Texas, as the 2013 Worldcon venue.

Tanith Lee's story 'Snow-Drop' became controversial when its inclusion in a Cairo University fantasy-fiction reading list was denounced, supposedly for the lesbian scene: 'Teaching homosexuality at Cairo

University', ranted an Egyptian paper. The story was taught for a whole term without complaint; the *Guardian* suggests a 'fabricated moral scandal' aimed at the CU English department, whose staff is predominantly female and one of whose professors was recently elected as Cairo University's first-ever female dean.

Jonathan Carroll, celebrated fantasy author, has turned up in DC's rebooted *Superman* comics continuity as Lois Lane's boyfriend. Homage or coincidence? No one seems quite sure.

As Others See Us II. Laurie Penny on the crowds queueing for *Harry Potter* 7 part 2: 'Many of the fans have drawn wobbly spectacles and lightning scars onto their faces as they shout in chorus, and I am reminded of Christopher Hitchens' observation that the lightning bolt on the forehead was also the symbol of Oswald Mosley's fascists.' (*Independent*)

More Awards. *Campbell Memorial*: Ian McDonald, *The Dervish House*. • *Chesley* life achievement (art): Boris Vallejo. • *Lambda* (LGBT), sf/fantasy/horror category: Sandra McDonald, *Diana Comet and Other Improbable Stories*. • *Mythopoeic* (fantasy). Adult fiction: Karen Lord, *Redemption in Indigo*. Children's: Megan Whalen Turner, 'Queen's Thief' series. • *Prometheus* (libertarian): Sarah Hoyt, *Darkship Thieves*. • *Sidewise* (alternate history). Long: Eric G. Swedin, *When Angels Wept: A What-If History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Short: Alan Smale, 'A Clash of Eagles' (*Panverse Two*). • *Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery* (unsung sf/fantasy authors): Katherine MacLean.

We Are Everywhere. More genre imagery in the press: 'The phone-hacking scandal has reached a tipping point familiar to any viewer of science fiction: the moment when the monster, created in a secret laboratory, finally breaks free of any restraint and goes rampaging off amid a trail of mayhem.' (*Sunday Telegraph*)

Court Circular. George Lucas's lengthy lawsuit against Andrew Ainsworth, designer of the *Star Wars* stormtrooper armour, was defeated in the UK Supreme Court despite letters of support from Steven Spielberg, Peter Jackson, James Cameron and Jon Landau, all trying to influence justice in Lucas's favour. The upheld decision is that Ainsworth's designs

were indeed props – copyright-protected for only 15 years, making it legal since 1992 for him to sell replicas – rather than artistic creations. Also controversial, to some, quarters was the court's observation that 'The *Star Wars* films are set in an imaginary, science-fiction world of the future...' (*The Register*) • Meanwhile, the daft *Willy the Wizard* plagiarism claim against Bloomsbury and J.K. Rowling finally routed in Britain: the judge felt and the Court of Appeal agreed that its chance of success was so low that £1.5m must be paid into court as security for expected costs. This was not forthcoming. (BBC)

Saci Lloyd's YA thriller *Momentum* is yet another work which Transcends Mere Genre despite sf themes like 'carbon rationing and environmental meltdown [...] augmented reality, police brutality, surveillance, free running and secret codes hidden in a global communications system called the Dreamline. Oh, and a forbidden love story between privileged citizen Hunter and outsider-on-the-run Uma. / Put baldly like that, it sounds like too much for one book to pack in, too unlikely to be anything other than dystopian science fiction. Yet one of the more exciting and chilling aspects of the book is just how close to reality it comes.' (Michelle Pauli, *Guardian*) The author herself caps this with the famous Atwoodian clincher: 'It's not squids in outer space but just slightly removed from today's reality...'

Marvin Kaye has bought *Weird Tales* from John Betancourt's Wildside Press and plans to edit it himself. The current editor Ann VanderMeer, under whom the venerable magazine won its only Hugo (2009), sadly reports that she and other staff are to be dropped; her last issue will be #359, scheduled for February 2012.

Thog's Masterclass. *Sensitivity Dept.* 'Even from the corner of her eye when one of her sobs was carried to him like a fallen leaf, he, thankfully, let her be.' (Taylor Holden, *The Sense of Paper*, 2006) • *Dept of Existential Insight.* 'Carnelian jerked awake. The cessation of pain was so instant he was sure he must be a corpse.' (Ricardo Pinto, *The Third God*, 2009) • *Try It With A Log Dept.* 'I lay awake upon the bed, unable to fall off.' (David Ebershoff, *The 19th Wife*, 2008) • *Amphiboly Dept.* 'Walking the street, Jones slipped on a pair of dark sunglasses.' (Jeffrey Thomas, 'Immolation', in *Punktown*, 2000)

R.I.P.

Hans Joachim Alpers (1943–2011), German sf author (sometimes as Jurgen Andreas), editor, critic, anthologist, publisher and literary agent, died on 16 February; he was 67. He co-edited the major reference *Lexicon der Science Fiction Literatur* (1980).

L.A. Banks (Leslie Esdaile Banks, 1959–2011), US author of many urban fantasies including the 'Vampire Huntress Legends' vampire series and the 'Crimson Moon' werewolf series, died from adrenal cancer on 2 August. She was 51.

Robert Ettinger (1918–2011), US cryonics advocate and founder of the Cryonics Institute, who also published some stories (starting 1948) and articles in sf magazines, died on 23 July and was of course frozen. He was 92.

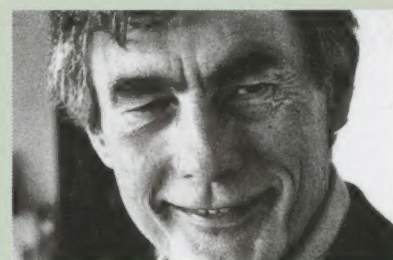


▲ **Colin Harvey** (1960–2011), UK sf author and anthologist whose small-press book debut was *Lightning Days* (2007) and whose career had since taken off with two novels from Angry Robot, died on 16 August following a stroke on the previous day. His story 'The Killing Streets' appeared in *Interzone* #225. He was 50.

Richard A. Hoen (1928–2010), US fan who in 1948 sent a joke letter to *Astounding SF* about its November 1949 contents – to which John W. Campbell famously responded by publishing the issue more or less as described – died on 2 August last year.

Sakyo Komatsu (1931–2011), leading Japanese sf author best known in the West for his influential disaster novel *Japan Sinks* (*Nippon Chinbotsu*, 1973; trans 1976) but also hugely prolific in untranslated works, died on 26 July; he was 80.

Philip Rahman (1952–2011), co-founder of the World Fantasy Award-winning US weird fiction publisher Fedogan & Bremer, died on 23 July aged 59.



▲ **Theodore Roszak** (1933–2011), US historian and cultural critic who began publishing sf with *Bugs* (1981), gained a cult following for *Flicker* (1991) and shared the Tiptree Award for *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (1995), died on 5 July; he was 77.

William Sleator (1945–2011), US author of more than 30 books including many children's and young-adult sf and fantasy novels, died on 2 August aged 66. An early sf title is *House of Stairs* (1974).

Martin Woodhouse (1932–2011), UK author of scripts for Gerry Anderson's *Supercar* (1961–1962, with his brother Hugh) and other tv sf including *The Avengers*, died on 15 May aged 78. He also wrote five technothrillers full of sf gadgetry, beginning with *Tree Frog* (1966).



A

TIME FOR RAVEN

STEPHEN KOTOWYCH

Fog had hidden Haida Gwaii from outsiders since the Beginning, from the time of Raven, until Captain Cook arrived in the eighteenth century. It was good of the captain, thought Wilson Gwaeskun, to discover his Haida ancestors who never knew they were lost.

With a double-bladed paddle Wilson pushed his kayak from shore, into the fog and the swift current of the Yakoun River. Fog wouldn't stop him. He'd dreamt of the river of late, of paddling; dreamt of glassy river stones sliding from sight beneath dark water, and he with them.

Not dreams but visions, Wilson decided. The first Haida had washed up on shore in a cockleshell and were freed by Raven. Now, Raven called Wilson back to the waters of his ancestors, to the ocean, to be finally released.

So let the waves take his body and smash his kayak. Let him become *gagiid* – the One Carried Away, the wild spirit from ancient songs born when a kayaker was lost at sea. Let the water cleanse his spirit and bring him peace as he disappeared into the depths.

Mists wrapped the forested banks, moving upon the face of the water. In the west, great billows of low cloud obscured wooded mountain peaks, like rolling avalanches frozen in mid-slide.

The cool slick of moisture against his skin did nothing to soothe the fiery ache in Wilson's shoulders and hands as he paddled. He rested a moment, feeling the strong grip of the current pull the kayak downriver.

His hands, with their swollen knuckles and the thin, translucent skin of age, were so different, he thought, from the strong hands of his days as a timber surveyor, from the hands that had paddled the Yakoun with Madeline.

By the end of her illness she'd no longer remembered him. He'd visited her grave a final time before setting out, apologizing that after more than fifty years of marriage he wouldn't be buried by her side.

The scents of pine needles, damp loam, and water full of living things hung in the air. Underneath were hints of moldering leaves, fish washed up on shore, the sweet of rotting wood.

Indistinct at first, a skeletal form emerged from the haze. Jutting from the forested point of a small island, a denuded spruce tree lay where it had fallen years before. Its top branches stretched out over the flowing water as if the limbs – bare but for a few dead needles – reached for help from the far shore.

Wilson felt a twinge of panic seeing the tree again. His eyes darted to the front hull compartment of his kayak, his mind filling with thoughts of his cargo and of Hank Delaney. A sliver of anxiety slipped like a knife between his ribs. He took deep breaths and tried to focus on paddling.

He remembered when the prone Sitka – already covered by thick moss in the wet and damp of Haida Gwaii – stood fifty meters tall, a golden beacon shining through the forest green. *Kiid K'iyas* they called him, the only tree the Haida ever named – grandfather of the forest, sacred to the people.

To the scientists the Golden Spruce (as the Anglos called it) was a mutant – chlorotic, they said. It lacked the pigments that act like sunblock in the needles of a normal tree,

and should have scorched. A tree covered in yellow needles meant a tree that was already dead.

Yet *Kiid K'iyaa*s lived and thrived for five hundred years, its needles luminous since before Captain Cook laid eyes on them.

Wilson wasn't surprised by the confusion. *Kiid K'iyaa*s was a gift of the Creator, and neither was so easily understood.

What few but the Haida knew was that *Kiid K'iyaa*s had been human once. Long ago, when the ancestors mistreated each other and the land, the Creator buried their villages under snow. An old man and a boy hid under a spruce plank and were the only ones to survive. When the Creator found them, he told them to flee up the Yakoun River without looking back, lest they remember and repeat the mistakes of the others. But the boy disobeyed, and for his defiance was transformed into the Golden Spruce.

On the near shore a grey-brown seal, resting after chasing Chinook through snaking forest rivers, roused himself from the base of a sheltering red cedar. The seal bobbed up and down as he called, comical with his underbelly covered in pine straw and dirt.

Did the seal bellow at him, Wilson wondered, or at the bear whose slick-furred head poked from the water as it paddled silently by the far shore?

Wilson felt unworthy of such a send-off.

Haida tradition said the tree would stand until the last generation. When it was cut down, the born-again preacher in town said it was God's sign to the Haida that they lived in the End Times, and that the last of them holding to pagan ways needed to get saved and get ready for the Rapture.

Wilson, though, didn't think the Creator wanted *Kiid K'iyaa*s dead any more than did the Haida.

How could someone understand a life spanning centuries? You could look at the exposed stump of the tree, where the chainsaw had chewed across, and travel time on its rings.

When the tree was born, Columbus was sailing from Spain. There was a ring for the Reformation. There was another for the English Civil War. The American Revolution and their Civil War. Confederation. Two World Wars. Man walking on the moon. There, a ring when Shakespeare was born; there, one when he died. Rings for Mozart, Newton, Lincoln, Lenin, Einstein. That's what the Anglos would see, anyway.

Wilson saw a ring when Cook visited Haida Gwaii, putting it on a map so others could follow. He saw rings marking the years of smallpox that wiped out all but a few hundred Haida. Rings for Chief Koyah, Chief Wiah, Chiefs Stiltla, Ninsingwas, Skidgate and the rest.

All brought to an end by one man working a chainsaw in the dead of a winter's night.

There was no getting a kayak into the water from the end of the Golden Spruce Trail, and nowhere on the far shore to land. Swimming would have been the only way across. Wilson could imagine Hank Delaney slipping into the frigid winter Yakoun, naked as a serpent, dragging his clothes and chainsaw sealed in plastic.

The near-freezing water would have killed an ordinary man, but Wilson had seen Hank take similar swims in the Yakoun at all times of year. If Wilson could believe anyone getting across

the twenty-meter stretch of the fast-flowing Yakoun it was Hank Delaney.

And the tree had come down, hadn't it?

Up the far bank Delaney had slithered and, working only by whatever light he'd brought, wasted no time in butchering *Kiid K'iyaa*s.

First, the thick buttress ridges that helped stabilize the hulking tree. He sliced them off the same way Wilson had seen men carve thick, meaty fins from sharks and whales. Then to the trunk, four and a half meters in diameter, where deep wedge gashes gave him access to the interior. Window-block cuts through the heartwood fatally weakened the tree. His chain-saw roaring for hours, Delaney positioned his cuts and wedges so the tree would fall toward the river when the next strong winds blew...

And then he was gone, slipping back into the chill waters, leaving *Kiid K'iyaa*s, mortally wounded, teetering uncertainly in the night.

How long had he been paddling? Maybe hours. Maybe forever. He couldn't see the shoreline – was he even moving? In a flash Wilson imagined the whole world disappeared. All that remained was the ten or twelve meters of water all around him and the mist. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, in and out, in and out, feeling cool moisture fill his nostrils, paddling all the while.

As he opened his eyes the mass of an island ghosted from the fog. Stripped bare of trees down to weather-bleached stumps it was a white, bloated corpse adrift in the water.

The eastern face of the island had slipped and given way. Tiny green tufts clung here and there along the five-kilometer long landslide. University students had probably planted the seedlings a summer or two ago at the behest of some logging company, a few months spent in the woods saving the environment.

Wilson turned his kayak away and fog enveloped the island like a funeral shroud, hiding it from view. His guilt slunk back down inside him and hid again, too.

During his days as a timber surveyor Wilson had scouted virgin stands, laying out logging roads for crews that would come and clear-cut huge swaths of forest. Sometimes he wondered how many trees he'd helped cut down, how much of the old growth his ancestors had known.

In some abstract way he'd known the roads he laid brought loggers and their machines, that the trees he scouted would end up as timber or pulp and paper. But he'd always moved on to the next scouting project before it happened: a timber scout who'd never seen a clear-cut.

So there was no more startling an experience in Wilson's life than moving in a single step from the loamy darkness of dense old-growth to the barren moonscape of a clear-cut so big you couldn't see the other side. The move from living trees and rich earth to cutting slash and eroding soil was as drastic as the end of a fall from a tall building.

Someone once told Wilson you could see some of the big, starfish-shaped clear-cuts from space. He didn't know if it was true, but he could believe it.

He remembered crying.

Wilson was long retired when he met Hank Delaney. Hank was a forest technician; one of the best, as Wilson understood. He specialized in the high-altitude timber too difficult and too expensive to get in Wilson's day, when trees were still growing at lower elevations.

But when Hank came back from a road-marking trip up near the Alberta border, he was a changed man. There was fervor in his voice, fire in his eyes.

That's when Wilson took notice of him. There had been no environmental movement when Wilson worked the timber, no protestors spiking trees as they had in Clayoquot Sound in the '90s. He wished later that someone had said something. He wished he'd said something. But no one did, until Hank Delaney.

Hank's commitment to protecting the forest amazed Wilson – it was a convert's zeal and it fired Wilson's soul. Usually the white man found his religion in the desert places of the world. But Hank found religion up there, amongst the trees. Maybe it found him.

For a time Hank kept his job surveying with the timber companies, but his reports soon became difficult for the companies to deal with. He started arguing for huge tracts of prime timber to be set aside and protected. When that didn't work, vitriolic attacks on the companies and their logging methods were included right in the reports. It wasn't long before he was out of a job.

Wilson came back to himself as the bottom of the kayak scraped rock. He'd been lost in the rhythm of his paddle stroke, zoned out staring at the front cargo hold. The bottom shouldn't be so shallow... Where was he?

Though mists shrouded the shore, Wilson had entered the mouth of a narrow forest river. But one he didn't know about? The river flowed east, which meant it emptied into the ocean. He decided to follow its course to the Hecate Strait.

The Anglos had named the strait for the Greek goddess of witchcraft and the land of the dead. The Hecate was known for overfalls and blind roller waves ten to twenty meters high, and waves that ricocheted back and forth off cliff faces, picking up speed to form a mass of roiling, malevolent ocean.

Perhaps it wasn't such a bad name after all, Wilson thought. He would know soon enough.

When Hank finally related the vision he'd had, Wilson wasn't surprised in the least. He'd always suspected something of the sort.

Hearing Hank speak of the experience made Wilson finally understand why prophets and mystics seemed to speak in riddles. He could speak of the vision only in impressions: of being in the woods one moment and then *being* the trees the next; of his profound connection with the natural world on every level of being; of a wholeness in the experience not present in daily life. And there was the call, a sense of mission.

It was clear enough to Wilson that call had come from the Creator, and that Hank would fulfill a destiny to protect the forests.

But not everyone was so accepting of Hank's vision.

Doctors diagnosed him as paranoid schizophrenic. Hank said

they worked for the logging companies that were persecuting him and ruining his reputation. He blamed the same companies for the foreclosure threats against his house, for the restraining orders.

Without a job and refusing to take his meds, it wasn't long before Hank's wife left, taking their two children. He blamed the logging companies for that, too.

Years earlier, other doctors said Wilson's friend Bill, a tribal shaman, was mentally ill. It didn't bother Wilson. Maybe you had to be schizo to be a shaman, to tune in to the voices of the ancestors, of nature, of the Creator. Hank spoke the truth and Wilson knew it.

But the fury that Hank vented toward the logging companies soon turned on the Haida and other locals. He accused them of 'collaborating' with the logging companies, and used the Golden Spruce as his example.

The island the Golden Spruce grew on was part of a timber company set-aside. Package tours hauled busloads of people to the site every year, like a forest theme park; on the far side of the ridge behind them hundreds of square kilometers were stripped bare. None of the tours ever went there.

Why was one tree so special, he asked, when countless others were not? Why keep the Golden Spruce like a pet and let so many other trees die?

It was then, Wilson later realized, that Hank had decided to make an example of *Kiid K'yaas*.

The morning after he'd butchered the Golden Spruce, before anyone knew what had happened, Hank gave Wilson his chainsaw.

He'd moved into the Golden Spruce Inn, of all places, and went about giving away all his possessions. Wilson couldn't forgive himself for not realizing his friend was making preparations, saying goodbyes. Did Delaney know he wasn't long for the world once he cut down *Kiid K'yaas*?

Having no need for the chainsaw Wilson took it anyway, out of friendship. He could always give it back later. The chain was well oiled, the engine greased, the handle sticky with sap. When Wilson realized days later where the sap came from, he felt like the chainsaw was covered in blood.

Wilson had often wondered why he kept it. It was a macabre trophy, why not be rid of it? He hadn't mentioned the chainsaw in his farewell letter (Wilson didn't want to think of it as a suicide note). Instead, it lay wrapped in canvas in the front hull compartment of his kayak, traveling with him to his end.

Those who had been nearby when *Kiid K'yaas* finally fell said it felt and sounded like a whale being thrown at your feet. Babies had been woken crying by the sound of the fall more than two kilometers away.

The river narrowed again. Steep, loamy banks loomed on either side, the river almost too shallow for the kayak. Crowded by the riverbanks, Wilson used his paddle to push off one bank and then the other, walking the kayak downstream.

He was reminded of squeezing into the courthouse in Massey the morning of Delaney's trial. Inside, every gallery seat was taken, and crowds stood at the back of the tiny courtroom. Outside, a dozen news vans packed with satellite feeds and coiffed

reporters stood ready to cover the madman eco-terrorist story.

Wilson had needed to see Delaney again, look him in the eyes. How could someone he treated as a friend – as a son! – have betrayed him like that?

But Delaney never showed.

At first, Wilson didn't understand. Delaney *wanted* his day in court: it was his soapbox to rail against timber companies, the government of British Columbia, against the Haida who had allowed logging on lands they still controlled.

Weeks passed, and then months, with no sign of Delaney. But in the spring a crew doing salmon fishery surveys found wreckage on a beach near the Alaska border. A cook stove, an axe and – more ominously – a ruined life jacket, tatters of a nylon tent, the shattered hull of a kayak. They had washed up like driftwood during winter storms on the Hecate – storms which, it seemed, had claimed the life of Hank Delaney.

Wilson wept that night, but only partly from sorrow – his tears were also angry ones.

What had become of Hank's mission? What of the work the Creator had appointed to him? Hank had gotten it so wrong. How could he have thought killing *Kiud K'iyaa*s was the Creator's will? How could he have disobeyed?

But more than just a lost friend, it was the hope that Hank had briefly restored to him that Wilson mourned. In Hank's mission Wilson had seen a chance for his own redemption, too – atonement for helping to destroy the forests for all those years. But with Hank gone so was Wilson's chance.

The river quickened. Wilson smelled salt on the air and thought he could hear the pounding surf. The Hecate neared. It would all be over soon.

Madeline was what kept Wilson going after Hank died. He often thought it strange how sitting by her bedside, coping with her tragedy, helped him cope with the tragedy of Delaney, too.

And so when Madeline had finally passed away six weeks earlier, Wilson found his last anchor to the world gone.

He felt no great surge of grief; he'd mourned Madeline for years before she actually died. Instead, he simply felt tired.

So taking only the chainsaw and his guilt with him, Wilson set out for the ocean. Let the waves make him *gagiid* and bring him peace, at last.

The river's pull inescapable now, water rushed toward the Hecate. The kayak pitched forward, shooting down a cascade of rapids, and was spat into the ocean swell.

Wilson's bow plunged below the surface as he landed and the crash of frigid water over him stole his breath away. Gasping as the boat bobbed up, Wilson paddled hard, his blades sometimes pulling through water, other times finding only air as the water undulated beneath him. He squinted against the driving wind, tasting the harsh saltiness of the sea on his lips. He had to get away from land and to the open ocean. He couldn't risk being pushed back to shore, having the strength and courage for only one attempt.

Howling, the wind whipped and swirled around him, pushing him one moment, pulling the next. How had the fog not blown away? As waves crashed over him, Wilson cut and pulled through the water, his paddle cartwheeling until his arms felt afire. He was in the open currents now, out of sight of land even without the fog. So his paddling slowed, then stopped,

and Wilson, panting with exertion, waited for the end.

He caught himself reflexively adjusting his weight and balance to avoid tipping, as so many years of kayaking with Madeline had given him skill and instinct. The Hecate was as violent as he'd heard. Wind and waves came from all directions, disorienting him. The air smelled of salt and seaweed. He knew the next wave would tip him if he let it.

A terrible moment of waiting came, almost of calm, though the waves still swelled. It was the nervous anticipation on a roller coaster before the first great plunge. As a rolling wall of water approached, Wilson felt a sudden queasiness, but not from the waves.

A roar, then a great blow from the left, and then freezing, inky darkness.

Thousands of pinpricks attacked Wilson's skin as the icy water enveloped him. Salt burned his eyes, and he sank down, down, down, pushed deep by currents. The crashing waves above were distant thunder, replaced by the swish and gurgle of water, and bass rumbles from the depths. It was almost peaceful, though swelling around him he felt competing currents ready to erupt to the surface.

Lungs burning, the urge to exhale was almost unbearable. Should he breathe out now? he wondered. Panic tightened his chest. How did one decide when to drown?

The kayak lurched violently upwards. A current popped Wilson back to the surface like a cork into the howl of wind and wave.

His hungry lungs gulped in air. Through salt-stung eyes, Wilson saw another roller coming from his right. He felt more than nausea this time. He tried to turn the kayak into the wave, but managed only one paddle-stroke before the roller picked him up and crashed him down under the water.

As the great cold surrounded Wilson again, no thought of suicide remained. He'd seen what fate awaited him in the water, seen what death was like. Being thrown to the surface had shaken him of any desire to die. He didn't want to become *gagiid*. Perhaps it was instinct, perhaps fear, but survival was his only thought.

Wilson grabbed at one of the paddle blades. Extending the paddle into the frigid blackness he pointed it towards bottom, fathoms below. Holding the shaft tight in his other hand, he leaned hard to the right, pushing the top blade away and pulling the shaft toward him. He felt the kayak begin to roll and pulled with all his remaining strength.

He wanted to live. He had to live.

The kayak righted itself, pulling Wilson above the surface. He gasped and sputtered as air flooded starved lungs.

Cold. So cold. Wilson knew hypothermia wasn't far off. He hadn't planned on coming back and hadn't worn a wetsuit.

What was that there, in the fog? Were those trees?

The shape was indistinct in the waning light, and saltwater stung his eyes, but it was *something*. With exhausted arms and throbbing joints he struggled against the waves, fighting with each stroke to reach land. It took only minutes. It felt like hours.

Wilson fumbled with the spray skirt, his hands numb and unresponsive. Lurching from the kayak, he landed in shallow, icy water, the rough stones of the beach scraping his hands. Teeth chattering, Wilson fought his own shaking to pop the

rear cargo hatch.

He pulled out the survival kit – waterproof matches, a knife, some fishing line, a foil thermal blanket.

Wilson struggled to pull the kayak up on shore and staggered from the beach to the tree line. Falling to his knees, he scoured the nearby ground. Dry leaves and branches, scraps of bark and withered grasses, anything to act as tinder. He shielded the matchbox against the wind with his body, shaking violently like a rag doll in the hand of an angry child. Wilson took a dozen tries with uncooperative hands to spark the match and get a flame.

When the pile he'd gathered smoked and crackled, Wilson cast about for fuel. He pulled a chunk of driftwood from where tides had tossed it in the tree line and threw it on the small fire, hoping it was dry enough to catch. He found a thick, dead branch, then another.

Stripping off his sodden clothes, Wilson wrapped the foil blanket around himself and moved close to the fire. He might still die from hypothermia and exposure he knew, and thoughts of his own death filled him, for the first time in a long time, with sadness.

Wilson opened his eyes as a pale dawn broke over the forested island. The winds had died, and the fire had dwindled to glowing orange coals and white ash.

He didn't remember falling asleep. He thought it a miracle that he'd woken up. Setting his clothes to dry by the fire, he nudged the unburned end of one log on the coals and sat shivering as the fire flared again. When his clothes had dried, Wilson dressed and studied his surroundings.

A grey sea reflected a slate sky. His kayak was where he'd left it, and he pulled it from the tide line. There was no land on the horizon, and he had no idea where he was. There weren't any islands in the Hecate, and he hadn't been in the strait long enough to cross to the mainland.

Though still frigid, Wilson thought the danger of hypothermia had passed. Pulling the foil blanket close he set off into the woods to forage for food.

After ten minutes with no luck, Wilson caught a glimpse of red deep in the forest. Hopeful it might be berries he pushed through the brush and came upon a tattered piece of cloth hung up in a bush.

Though the colour was faded by the elements, it looked like a piece of red and black checked wool from a coat much like the one Wilson wore. Nearby was another piece, and another.

Pulling at one shred, he hauled up the tattered remains of the coat from beneath leaves and pine straw.

What was it doing there? On the beach, he could understand – the Hecate dumped all manner of things on shore. But this was too far inland.

Turning to see if any other artifacts were nearby, Wilson's breath caught. He dropped the coat and the foil blanket and crashed through the undergrowth at a run.

He slowed and cautiously approached the sapling, perhaps a half-metre tall. The tree was a sliver of luminous gold amongst the green.

Wilson reached out his hand. Did he dare? Yes, he had to be sure it was real. He ran his fingers through the sharp, waxy

needles and fell to his knees.

He didn't know how long he cried, but when the joyful tears stopped he studied the small tree. It was *Kiid K'iyas* in every detail but size, lit with the same inner fire, each needle a brilliant gold.

A meter or so from the tree Wilson saw a shape on the forest floor. Yes, a boot. And there was its twin, disguised by the detritus of the forest floor. And were those a pair of jeans?

From the back pocket he produced a soggy nylon wallet. Tearing at the Velcro, Wilson cried out. Staring back at him through a dew-fogged plastic sleeve was Hank Delaney's driver's licence.

Just because his kayak and gear were found near the border didn't mean Delaney had been there himself. He could have washed ashore here, just as Wilson had. Or perhaps he was compelled to seek out this unknown island. A kayak left by the water would eventually be swept out to sea and dashed to pieces on some distant shore.

But its owner had remained here, and always would. Wilson wiped away tears and chided himself for not realizing the truth of Hank's fate sooner.

For Wilson recalled again the ancient story of the boy who, for his defiance, was transformed into the Golden Spruce.

As Hank Delaney had been, for his disobedience.

Strange, thought Wilson, to be turned into something so beautiful as punishment, to become what you destroyed. As the preacher in town said: "The Lord works in mysterious ways."

He'd once heard someone describe a *gagiid* as a person whose spirit was too strong to die. Delaney had been one, and was punished for his transgression.

Wilson raced through the bush to the kayak. He tore the hatch cover from the bow cargo hold and pulled out the canvas-wrapped chainsaw before shoving his kayak into the swells. At the far end of the beach, a finger of rock jutted out over the ocean. Climbing to its edge, with a great cry Wilson heaved the bundle into deep water.

It was for the tree, the new *Kiid K'iyas*, that he would care for now, live for now.

That meant he could tell no one. The tree belonged to all Haida, and as Wilson watched the kayak float away he regretted that even his fellow elders couldn't know of its existence. But if no one knew of the tree no one could harm it.

Wilson didn't know how many more years the Creator would give him, but he would spend them there, on the island of the *gagiid*.

He began to sing an old song, a song of transformation not heard in a long time. The song became a dance around and around the tree, filling the woods with Wilson's cadence. He danced and sang long into the night, the first of many such rituals.

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'The Ever-Dreaming Verdict of Plagues' is a sequel to Jason Sanford's 'Plague Birds', which appeared in issue #228. Jason is already writing the third story in this sequence and has plotted out another four stories, which will reveal the complete tale of Crista's early years as a plague bird. If you are interested in reading Jason's other stories, his collection *Never Never Stories* was recently released as a trade paperback by Spotlight Publishing (see this issue's Book Zone). For more information, go to www.jasonsanford.com.

THE ever-DREAMING VERDICT OF PLAGUES

JASON SANFORD

Murder it is, Cristina de Ane thought as she gripped the condemned woman's face. The woman, Jennery Flats, stood five hands higher than Crista, an impossibly tall human whose every movement flowed to grace like doves climbing the highest reaches of sky. Not that Crista could mistake Jennery for a dove. Yes, her face was covered in downy grey-brown feathers. But her gaze burned to the brightness of eagles – orange eyes which glared at Crista with both defiance and sadness.

As Crista pulled back from Jennery's memories, she released her grip so the woman collapsed across the village's dirt stage. Jennery shivered as her friends and neighbors howled for her death.

The blood AI inside Crista smoked and giggled. It healed the cut on Crista's hand – through which the artificial intelligence had caressed Jennery's mind – and whispered of the violence to come. Iron bile flooded Crista's mouth as memories of the many deaths the AI had gifted across the centuries flickered through her. An unending shriek of joy at the guilty being gutted and split and ripped and torn and eaten and dismembered.

Crista rubbed the red line burning from the corner of her right eye to her lips and again wished she could rip out the AI inside her. In the six months since this creature had entered her body she'd been responsible for a handful of those violent memories. Now she had to kill this bird-woman lying in the dust before her. Jennery's eagle eyes again locked onto Crista's and, while remaining defiant, begged for... what, Crista couldn't say. All Crista could give were the rules, and punishment, and nothing more.

"Well, plague bird?" the village alderman growled. Crista turned on him, angry at the insolence in his voice. Her eyes screaming red fire until the alderman wilted before her, bowing his tiger-genet body as he apologized. The assembled villagers shifted nervously in the dark, amused at their overbearing leader being taken down a notch but also afraid of him and Crista.

"She's guilty," Crista announced. "I've seen the murder. She threw the child off the dam."

The villagers hissed and growled while the alderman moaned a deep, primal cry. The dead child had been his son.

Crista looked around her. The villagers twitched and shook to the genetic pox as glowing cat eyes mixed alongside ordinary human eyes, and angry whispers rasped from muzzles and snouts and lips. And teeth. Not a single human tooth shone before Crista. Instead, fang and drill and flashes of what looked like razors glinted in the villagers' mouths. Crista had never seen a village with such extreme genetic variation.

If Crista hadn't been a plague bird, these villagers would have killed her for daring to enter their sanctuary. They still ran wild, teeming with the gened instincts and fury which flowed across humanity these days.



They are a new village, her blood AI, which called itself Red Day, whispered in her mind. Not one generation from the hunt. But that doesn't change your duty.

Crista nodded. If she hadn't been here the villagers would have already ripped Jennery Flats to meat. While their justice would have been bloody, it would have also been far more merciful than what Crista was about to do.

Still, Crista had her duty. She pulled one of the twin red knives sheathed to her red-trousered thighs and shook her scary stock of red-burned hair. "You know the rules," she yelled, pointing the knife at the villagers. "Go against them and you die. Painfully. Since this woman broke the most important rule, she's mine."

Crista hated how silly her over-dramatic performance sounded, but Red Day always encouraged her to act the part. As the AI often told Crista, punishment wasn't the biggest deterrence for people – it was fear. And what did people fear more than a plague bird?

Crista sliced her own wrist with the knife, sending a crimson arc through the air as Red Day rushed free. The blood AI circled and shrieked and fell towards Jennery, licking into everyone's mind so they could see exactly what it planned to do. Crista saw an imagined flash of the bird-woman being split up the middle. Of the AI ripping her womb out and revealing the child inside. Of Red Day throwing the still forming child before Jennery's eyes as she screamed for mercy...

In that instant, Crista stared fully at Jennery Flats. Even though her weather-worn smock hid the fact, Crista knew she was pregnant.

"Return!" Crista yelled at Red Day. Her blood hovered in the air as the AI churned and screamed, unwilling to obey so close to feasting on another. The red line on Crista's face burned fire as she again ordered the AI to return to her body. Red Day grudgingly obeyed and the mist of blood flowed back into her wrist and healed her skin.

Jennery Flats gasped and collapsed face down in the dust, overwhelmed by the unexpected reprieve.

Crista grabbed the alderman and threw him into the crowd of villagers, who screamed and fled before her. "She's pregnant," Crista screamed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

The alderman stared at her from the dew-wet grass, the striped fur on his face rippling nervously. "You are the plague bird," he whispered, rubbing a patch of bare skin on his cheek. "Shouldn't you know such things?"

From inside Crista, Red Day chuckled its agreement. The alderman was right. She should have known.

As the sun rose, Crista sat on the packed-dirt porch of the alderman's house and watched the villagers go about their morning chores. A handful of people hoed the fields as others milked cows and slopped hogs. Compared to Crista's home village – which had existed for centuries and was so orderly its fields resembled a checkered quilt – this place was a disaster. The crops looked as if seeds had been thrown randomly on the ground while the hog pens were little more than cut trees stacked in a square.

Again, they are a new village, Red Day whispered. *There's no record of another plague bird ever visiting here. You judge too harshly.*

Crista laughed at Red Day thinking her harsh, causing a passing villager to glance at her as if she was crazy. She considered ordering the AI to remove her presence from everyone's senses – edit the stimuli the villagers' minds received so she was for all purposes invisible – but decided against it. Better they be reminded she was here.

"Too harsh, eh?" she muttered to herself. "You wanted to kill a pregnant woman."

Rules are rules. Her condition doesn't change the sentence.

"Still, strange you didn't know she was pregnant until I released you. I mean, you linked with her body and mind."

Red Day's silence told Crista the AI was also irritated at missing such an obvious fact until the last moment.

Crista stood up to check on Jennery Flats. The alderman had gifted Crista his crudely-built log house for the duration of her stay. He'd also offered to lock Jennery up in the village barn, but Crista had refused. With everyone's blood up at the murder, she didn't need someone turning vigilante. So she'd placed the woman in the alderman's cellar and stood guard herself.

Unfortunately, this meant she was forced to spend more time than she liked around Jennery. It was hard enough to kill a stranger. But to kill someone you were beginning to know on a personal level...

You've kissed her memories, Red Day said snidely. *There's nothing more personal – or perhaps I should say more intimate – than that.*

Crista ignored the AI. She unbolted the rough-hewn cellar door and walked into the darkness beneath the house.

Jennery crouched in the dirt corner, wedged between two of the foundation's stacked mica-stone columns. The tall, thin woman growled softly, a wolf-gened urge which brought a smile to Crista's face. The woman was of part lupine heritage, the same as Crista. But her eyes and down-feathers were obviously gened from eagles. An amazing mix of animal and human. Even more amazing was that compared to her fellow villagers Jennery was one of the most human here.

Crista sat on the bottom stair. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

"What does it matter? Just kill me. I'm no good at waiting."

Red Day again whispered its offer to kill the woman. *I'll do it with mercy, with no pain to the woman or her unborn child.*

Crista shuddered, not trusting any promise the AI could make.

"You should still eat and drink," Crista said. "And I haven't decided what to do with you."

Jennery laughed. "You've seen my memories. I killed the child. Every moment you wait only makes the others fear plague birds a little less."

Crista nodded calmly but Red Day shrieked inside her, eager to enact its justice on this self-admitted killer. As Red Day's anger exploded, the AI seized control of Crista's right hand and grabbed one of her knives. With a shout of no, Crista ran up the stairs. After bolting the cellar door shut she stumbled to the porch and threw up.

When she looked up, she saw the alderman watching her from beneath a nearby oak tree. A single bare spot of skin on his striped-fur face gleamed in the sunlight, exposing the green tattoo of a star. The alderman grinned happily and crunched large acorns between his powerful tiger jaws, almost as if en-

joying an amusing comedy at some harvest festival.

Crista cursed. Even Red Day burned with irritation at being caught in a vulnerable moment. Crista stormed into the log house and slammed the door shut.

She knew Jennery Flats had to be killed. It didn't matter if she was pregnant. There were limits to how long she could keep the blood AI from its programmed duty. If she refused to release it, Red Day might free itself and seek a partner less willing to control it. Maybe even that alderman, who would no doubt thrill at using the AI's power.

Easier to say than do, the AI whispered, and you forget that we're a good match. There are also things here I don't understand. Which, as you know, shouldn't be possible.

Crista grinned at Red Day's admission, which was as close as it had ever come to admitting a mistake.

Not a mistake, it muttered. A curiosity.

"Why don't we talk to someone about that curiosity?"

While Crista could sense that the village's own artificial intelligence was nearby, for some reason Red Day couldn't pinpoint it. After they walked in circles for a half hour, Red Day finally admitted it couldn't direct Crista to its fellow AI. Crista smirked and asked a villager for directions.

Instead of answering, the man – a cross between human and bear – glared hungrily at her for a moment before rubbing his right cheek. Under his thin black fur Crista saw the faint outline of another green tattoo in the same star design the alderman wore. The bear-man snorted and pointed to the forest east of the village. "Cross the dam. The AI's in the old church on the other side."

Crista thanked the man and walked away, ignoring the threatening way he watched her until she disappeared into the trees. Red Day grumbled about the need to teach this village respect, but Crista said no. That wasn't their duty.

Strange how you remind me of duty. You're the one who stopped us from our one true duty.

Crista pushed Red Day to the back of her mind and, instead of worrying about the blood AI, tried to enjoy her walk.

The trees soon rose tall around Crista, shading the sunlight into green-speckled motes and swirls which played across the damp undergrowth. Crista loved forests. Never mind that she'd grown up in a village of neat houses and fields and people who daily restrained their animal instincts. No, while that far-distant village may have been home, the wolf in her loved forests the most. There was nothing better than the cool, close-in scents of water and drip, decay and death, bud and leaf, oak and pine. Forests comforted her. Forests wrapped her body in love and reminded her that all had once been well in her world.

As a child, she'd often sneaked out of her house after sunset and run through the forest until tired. She'd then find a small clearing and lay down, listening to the night sounds of insects and owls and wolves while watching the stars spin away the hours. As she'd drifted in and out of sleep it often felt like the stars themselves gifted her with dreams of being a wolf forever.

Life would have been so simple as a wolf, she thought. Uncomplicated. Far better than being cursed into a plague bird's life.

Thank the stars such silly dreams eventually end, Red Day said,

snapping Crista out of her memories. The blood AI snickered as Crista cursed him under her breath.

Crista walked until the forest suddenly ended, the oaks and pines stopping as the ground turned to rock and crack-ancient cement. Before Crista lay the largest lake she'd ever seen, its placid waters running for miles into the distance. Her heart seized at the sight and she fought the wolf inside her, which whined to return to the forests behind them.

However, it wasn't the water which made Crista want to bolt in terror. It was the massive, translucent dam holding back the lake.

Steady, Red Day crooned, acting as if Crista was a nervous pack animal. The dam won't bite you.

Obviously built before the collapse of human civilization, the dam was thin like a giant sheet of paper yet ran a half mile across this rocky valley. And Crista could see through the dam as if through clear ice. The deep blue swirls of a massive wall of water rippled before her, held back by something so inconsequential it looked as if a giant wave was about to crash down. The dam scared Crista more than any other remnant of the old world she'd yet encountered.

Crista climbed up to the dam carefully, like a wolf sniffing for traps. She stepped gingerly onto the tiny walkway across the top and immediately jumped back, startled. While the dam looked slick as ice, it felt as solid as stone.

Red Day chuckled. *Don't worry, it will hold you.*

"Why can I see through it?"

Red Day reached out and caressed the dam. *Nano-filaments, it said, gently strumming molecular bonds too small for Crista to see. Fullerene buckyball chains. Incredibly strong. While they aren't always created so light passes through, the designers obviously wanted a vertigo-inducing effect.*

Crista walked quickly across the dam, trying not to look at the reflections of waves and fish below her feet. The front of the dam dropped down for several hundreds yards into a straight-edged spillway which surged with water, the power wasted except for a small village gristmill.

This is where Jennery killed the alderman's son, Red Day said, its thoughts low to the anger of justice denied.

Crista glanced at the white-foam waters below the dam as the memory of the child's murder ran through her mind. "There's plenty of time to handle Jennery," she said.

Red Day grumbled and retreated deep in her mind, sulking.

Crista found the village's AI in an ancient stone church on the far lake shore. Where the AI from Crista's home had been very much a mother hen – clucking over every person in its care as it worked to return them to their long-lost humanity – this AI was aloof, appearing to spend its days in isolated meditation.

The church stood without a roof and its gothic stained-glass windows were long gone. In their place shone the sparkling green lattices of a pretend roof and pretend glass, each swirling to whatever imagined sights the village AI desired. At the moment the green roof mirrored the swirls of the Milky Way while the windows showed Crista playing in a green forest.

Red Day whispered for Crista to be careful, which disturbed her. The blood AI was supposed to be able to handle any problem, even other AIs.



"That's not true," a tinny voice sighed. "Your blood AI is equipped to destroy both human and AI, but that hardly means it can handle all problems. That's why it can't be trusted without a human to control it."

Crista walked into the church. Before her rose a glowing green altar. She sat before it on an ancient wooden pew, its rotten supports creaking. "You know why I'm here?" she asked.

"Yes. Jennery Flats killed a child of this village. And not any child – the first truly human child we've produced, with none of the pox-driven craziness in him. He could have done so much for us."

Crista nodded. She'd found the young boy's body floating down the river, attracted to the grim discovery by Red Day's heightened senses. The boy had looked perfectly human with beautiful brown skin and wondrous black eyes. No hint of gene-sliced animals or creations in him.

The altar in front of Crista shifted into a green version of the little boy, water dripping from his mouth as he gasped for breath. Crista looked away, both puzzled and sickened. She asked Red Day why the village AI would project such a disgusting image but the blood AI had retreated so far into her body she couldn't speak to it.

"It's scared," the green AI said. "Scared you won't do your duty."

"My duty is...difficult. I've only been a plague bird for a short while. This isn't a life I chose."

The village AI flickered as if intrigued and reached out long green tentacles of light, which wafted transparently through the air as they caressed Crista's mind. "Yes and no," it said. "You were tricked into hosting the blood AI. But you did make the final choice."

Crista remembered her so-called choice. As the previous plague bird had died, her body exhausted from long centuries of life, Red Day had reached hungrily for her friends and family. If Crista had refused to accept the AI – to bond it to herself – everyone she loved would now be dead. Her village AI had tricked her into accepting Red Day by making her choose between saving her family and friends and her own revulsion at becoming a plague bird.

"That wasn't a true choice," she muttered.

"Perhaps. But who among us – AI or human – is given uninfluenced options in life?"

Before Crista could answer, the AI whispered in her mind of the grand days before humans gened themselves nearly to extinction. How the billions who'd died would have killed for Crista's choice. Ghostly faces and bodies swept around her. All the dead who'd ever been. She felt their pain. Felt their anguish as people who'd once been human tore apart their own civilization. As animal impulses erased all desire to hold the world together.

But Crista also saw the power of those days. The pride of humans leaving their weak bodies behind as they gened themselves into new beings. How they and their AIs felt so confident they dared build ships to reach beyond the stars.

Crista gasped as she returned to her senses and found herself again sitting on the rotten church pew. Above her the roof's projected Milky Way spun as time itself turned, eon after eon flowing through this AI. With a flash Crista realized the truth

of what this creature was telling her – that the amazing universe humans and AIs had almost created would return. That one day humanity and AI would complete what they'd started. Crista smiled. She wished she could live in those future times when the goals of humanity were far more than mere survival.

I can help you, the AI said. *Have you ever dreamed of going to the stars?*

"I don't know. When I was young I spent many nights staring at the stars. It's the wolf in me." But even as Crista said this, she realized that instead of merely staring at the stars maybe she'd also wanted to go to them. That maybe this was what she'd always needed in her life.

It is indeed what you've always needed, the AI said. *Together we'll return to the stars.*

"How? Everything we once had is gone."

Nonsense. Pieces remain, like the dam holding back this lake. Everything that once pushed humanity to create their wonders still exists, only scattered. It's up to us to reassemble our dreams.

Crista grinned, imagining flying into space and seeing her world from above. As the green AI's tentacles caressed her body, she realized she had been wrong about AIs. They could be trusted. They truly had humanity's best interest in mind. A tear slid down her face as she remembered the goodness of her old village AI. How it had been the right thing for that AI to trick her into accepting the amazing responsibilities of being a plague bird.

But even as Crista realized this, Red Day poked out of its hiding place deep within her body and slapped away the green AI's mental grip. Crista gasped as the rotten pew she sat on shattered, dropping her to the stone floor. She looked at the green AI's flickering altar. Where before she'd been ready to throw herself before it and profess her love and loyalty, she now remembered her own village AI's deceit. With a painful shiver, she realized this green AI had attempted something similar. It had tried to trick her into doing its bidding, although what that bidding might be she couldn't say.

The green AI laughed. "There's a reason you were gifted to that damn thing – you deserve each other. See to your duty. I have work to do."

Crista stood from the floor and bowed. Once outside the church door she gave in to her wolf side and ran, running faster than she'd run in months, running until she reached the safety of the forest. Running until Red Day reminded her that plague birds should never flee in fear from anything.

Even if there are things for plague birds to fear.

That evening at the alderman's house Crista cooked eggs and bacon in the stone fireplace while Jennery Flats glared in silence from the dinner table. Crista had insisted Jennery join her. When Crista placed the food before Jennery, the woman chuckled nervously. "A last meal?" she asked softly.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps an opportunity for your side of what happened."

"Since when are there 'sides' to plague birds?" Jennery said, draining her cup of milk and quickly shoveling eggs into her mouth. The woman wore one of the alderman's fur robes, which would no doubt annoy the man, as would the woman eating at his table. Crista could easily see the bulge of the woman's belly.

She was probably five months pregnant.

Based on my senses, exactly 21 weeks, Red Day whispered.

And why didn't you know this when you first touched her? Crista asked.

You know why.

She did indeed. For some reason, the village AI had masked the woman's pregnancy from Red Day's senses in the same way the blood AI could mask Crista from the eyes and ears of regular people. Subtlety upon subtlety. But to Crista's knowledge, no village AI should be able to do that same trick against a plague bird. Or be allowed by its programming to infiltrate Crista's mind like this one had done. The fact that the village AI had been able to so easily manipulate Red Day's senses indicated a level of power which scared them both.

It's name is Dawnbringer. I'm certain it is one of the original AIs. And it is powerful. All of the original AIs were either restricted in their power or destroyed. But for some reason Dawnbringer wasn't.

How do you know this?

When Dawnbringer manipulated your mind, it did the same to me. It almost had me wanting to join you in flying to the stars. Although obviously that's no longer an option for any human or AI.

Why does it want this woman killed? Crista wondered.

Try and find out, the blood AI said, *while I create some privacy.*

Crista nodded. Jennery's eyes narrowed as Crista pulled one of her knives and sliced her wrist. Crista's blood shot across the room, swirling and twisting as Red Day expanded until it coated everything in a hazy redness. Crista had never freed this much of the AI before and felt weak. Neither she nor the AI could remain apart for long without risking damage.

"I've isolated us," she told Jennery. "My blood blocks your village AI from seeing or hearing us. Why did you kill the child?"

"You've witnessed my memories. I was jealous of the alderman's son. Dawnbringer said my child would be born with the gened pox. I lost control at the news."

Crista watched the woman calmly relate this fact, and remembered how Jennery had also faced death with dignity. Hardly the actions of a person who lost control and killed the helpless.

"Were you happy in this village?"

"Compared to what? To joining the hunt clans? I want better for my child than to run the forests like an animal."

Around them, Red Day's glow faded. Crista didn't have much time. With the remaining drops of the blood AI still inside her, Crista caressed Jennery's skin. The woman's memories flashed through her with incredible speed. Crista saw the day of the killing. Saw Jennery weeding her crops. Saw her returning home. Falling asleep. And waking to the news that a child was missing.

Overlaying those memories were others – of the child being thrown off the dam into the spillway's surging waters. But there was no way these differing memories of the same day could exist. And the person killing the child wasn't a woman. He was a man. A man with much larger hands than Jennery could offer. Hands not covered in the down feathers which coated Jennery's body.

The alderman's tiger-striped hands! He'd killed his own son! "You didn't murder anyone," Crista gasped. "Dawnbringer placed those memories in your mind."

Jennery Flats growled – angry, furious – as Crista collapsed to the floor. She needed the AI back inside her.

With a sigh, Red Day poured into Crista's body. The AI was nearly back when suddenly it screamed, a bolt of pain which also smashed through Crista. The room spun as her eyes sparked to green-jumping fire.

Dawnbringer had just attacked them.

As the room returned to its normal candle-lit gaze – and as Red Day whimpered within her – Crista saw the alderman standing outside the window. Grinning. Backlit by Dawnbringer's emerald glow.

The alderman tapped the tattoo on his cheek. "A good hunt," he yelled as villagers ran to join him. "That's all we've ever wanted – a good hunt!"

Crista bolted for the door but it crashed open before she could reach it. A short, stout woman – who barely reached Crista's shoulder – squealed from a tusked mouth, the wild-boar bristles on her face and body extended in anger. Crista sliced her wrist to release Red Day but instead of spurting free only a few drops flew at the woman. But they were enough. Even though Red Day was injured, the AI melted into the woman's face as she screamed and fell backward.

More villagers crashed through the door and the window. Crista flung more blood at them, killing three more, their bodies ripping apart to spasms of meat and pain. But Red Day was too weak to stop them all. Crista slashed what looked like an ape-man with her knife as she ordered the blood AI to strengthen her body. She then ran at the log cabin's back wall. The foot-thick logs burst outward as the house fell in on itself.

Crista picked herself up from the cold, dewy grass. For a moment she glimpsed Jennery running away – she'd also fled through the hole Crista made. But when Crista stood to follow, she screamed. She'd broken her right leg and arm crashing through the logs.

Run for the lake, Red Day said weakly. *I'll try to heal your injuries.*

Crista nodded and stumbled toward the forest as the hunt howled around her. Grabbing a large sapling, Crista snapped it in half and used the trunk as a crutch. Each step blinded her with pain and her injured arm hung limp on ripped tendons. Instead of running silently like she usually did, Crista crashed through the forest, blundering into trees and branches and feeling like nothing more than wounded prey.

As she neared the lake she saw the dam, the clear nanofilaments glowing icy fire to the moonlight. A half mile to reach the other side. If she could cross the dam she could hide in the forest behind the church.

"Come out, plague bird," the alderman yelled, his voice mixing to tiger growls. "Give up and I promise all the quickness we can muster." Crista saw a blur of movement around her. The entire village had turned hunt and were after her. And flickering among the trees was Dawnbringer's green light, directing the hunters toward her.

Why doesn't Dawnbringer attack again? she wondered.



It's playing, Red Day answered. I'm so weak now we're only a toy to it.

Crista staggered painfully onto the dam's walkway as the howls grew closer. She walked as quick as she could but, half-way across, she missed a step and fell, her crutch falling over the side and tumbling into the spillway far below. In a flash the memory of Jennery Flats doing the same to the child overwhelmed her. Crista pulled herself back from the edge, shivering. No! Jennery hadn't killed the child. Those were someone else's memories. But the swirl of murder – of hands tossing the child into the waters below – still felt as real as anything Crista had ever known.

She shook the memory away. She had to keep going.

Crista crawled on across the causeway, but now the still lake waters turned against her as shadows rippled beneath the surface, arrowing in her direction. Crista slung drops of blood in the water, trying to use Red Day's powers to sense what was coming. But it was no use – he was too weak. She might as well be blind.

Suddenly a massive shape exploded from the water and her chest burned as claws tore shirt and flesh. She stared into a man-like face covered with slick, brown seal fur. The body behind it rippled to muscles and blubbery skin, bigger than an ox with webbed hands ending in hooked claws. She leapt aside, narrowly avoiding the creature's grasp and barely stopping herself before toppling off the dam. The beast snarled, exposing a mouthful of crooked, yellowed fangs.

The creature dove for her again as Red Day spun from Crista's wounded body and speared the seal-man's fiery eyes. The breast howled in pain and clawed at his face before falling off the dam.

But where before Red Day had always returned to her body automatically, this time Crista's blood fell from the air like weak rain. Crista touched her fingers to the dam's clear surface, trying to reclaim the AI's essence.

Leave it, Red Day said. My core is still within you. But we must hurry. I'm barely keeping you alive.

Crista crawled on, only to hear the alderman's laugh. He stood behind her on the dam, grinning alongside several villagers holding curved knives.

Crista again tried to release Red Day but the AI was now too weak to attack. She started to dive into the lake but saw several more seal-humans waiting, gnashing their large canines at her.

The only other option was to jump off the dam into the spillway's froth of angry water.

You must jump, Red Day whispered. I can't protect you now. But if I have time to recover, I might be able to bring you back.

That didn't sound promising to Crista, but an arrow shooting by her head changed her mind. She rolled off the dam and fell for long seconds before hitting the churning water below.

The last thing she knew was spinning – spinning in an endless cycle of up and down until she screamed for air which refused to come. Until she screamed, sucked water into her lungs, and finally, truly, died.

Crista woke in the muck of flood and forest, wood and branches. Her body hung on a snag along the river with her face barely above water. She tried breathing but couldn't move.

No air entered her stiff body. Her skin blue. Her eyes glazed so she couldn't see. She had died. She knew it. And she was still dead.

But even though she couldn't scent or see or hear, she was aware of those senses as if alive. Red Day was somehow helping her sense beyond herself. Without breathing she smelled shit and decay and dead fish, a scent which laughed at her as she realized it was her own deathly stench.

Crista called to Red Day but heard no answer. Still, she felt the blood AI deep within her. Wounded and near death, but also fighting to survive.

Crista's body hung on the snag for hours, the fish biting at her rubber legs, a turtle resting on her head. She was about to give up on ever again living when hands pulled her out of the water. Strong hands. Hands controlled by a downy face with eagle eyes.

"You'd better not be *dead* dead," Jennery Flats hissed. "You better not be after all I risked to help you."

Crista couldn't answer, but if her body had been capable of movement she would have smiled.

Jennery spent the next few days nursing Crista back to life in a burrow the bird-woman dug into the river bank's sand and clay. A small fire cracked and smoked softly, its heat providing enough energy for the blood AI to slowly heal Crista's body. Once Crista could move a bit, Jennery brought her food and water, which gave her more strength. And the stronger she became, the stronger Red Day also became in a wondrous loop of life and living.

"How did you find me?" Crista eventually asked when her body was healed enough to exhale air and move her lips.

"I don't know," Jennery said. "When you were attacked, I ran. But something told me to go downstream. To start searching the river for your body."

That was me, Red Day whispered. When I realized we'd been tricked, I didn't recall the drop of blood you'd used to access Jennery's memories. It told Jennery the only way we'd survive would be to jump in the river. That's why she looked for us.

Crista was impressed at Red Day's foresight. Crista hadn't even considered jumping in the river until she found herself on the dam and Red Day suggested it. Subtle. Almost as subtle as her village AI when it tricked her into becoming a plague bird, or Dawnbringer reworking her mind so she'd share in its dreams.

Subtle is what AIs do best, Red Day said.

Still doesn't make it right, Crista thought before her injured body pulled her back to sleep.

During the following weeks, Jennery twice dug a new den and moved Crista there in the middle of the night. She disguised the tiny opening of each den with plants and leaves and after placing Crista inside washed away their faint scent with water and crushed berries.

Without needing to ask, Crista knew they were being hunted.

One day Jennery returned to the den with a haunch of deer meat and an ancient ceramic bucket filled with water. "Is this enough to finish healing?" Jennery asked.

Red day whispered yes – *All we need at this point is time, it*

said – and Crista nodded her head. “Where are you going?”

“Away. The alderman and his hunt are searching the area. I can’t let them catch me.”

Crista understood. “Which path will you take?”

“Downstream. Find a village to take me. If not, there’s always the hunt.”

Crista tried to reach for Jennery – to touch her, to thank her – but her body was still too stiff. To Crista’s surprise, Red Day stirred with concern for Jennery. “You must walk fast,” the AI said with Crista’s mouth. “If we fight Dawnbringer, it might not be safe anywhere in this valley.”

Jennery stared at Crista, knowing this wasn’t her speaking and no doubt wondering about the coming battle. But Jennery didn’t protest the advice. She merely muttered agreement and fled the burrow.

In the darkness of the den, Crista tracked time by the decay of the deer meat beside her. First came stench. Then flies. Then maggots. Then nothing but bone to gnaw.

She occasionally heard the alderman and his hunt pass nearby, but Jennery had done a good job hiding the burrow and they never found her. And to Crista and Red Day’s great fortune Dawnbringer wasn’t with the villagers. Still, Red Day sensed them calling to the AI using the green tattoos on their faces. *Imprintable transmitter-receivers*, Red Day said. *It’s old space-travel technology. I would have realized this earlier if Dawnbringer hadn’t manipulated me.*

In addition to calling Dawnbringer, the alderman and his hunt also called to Crista. They implored her to join them. “The stars,” the alderman yelled. “Dawnbringer promises you nothing less than the stars themselves.”

It was a testament to the dream Dawnbringer had shown Crista that she had to fight to keep from calling out to the alderman. That she bit her lip to not scream out that she did indeed want the stars!

But despite this danger and her craving for Dawnbringer’s dream, Crista still enjoyed her days underground. Never mind that fleas bit her and she stank like the dead. She remembered the old stories her parents told her as a child. How their wolf ancestors had grown up in countless holes like this. She dreamed about all the humans and wolves whose genes had eventually merged to create her and felt like she was yet another in a long line of cubs waiting to emerge into the calm of life.

Red Day, though, was anything but calm. The AI twisted inside her, frustrated by being forced to live within such a weakened shell. Red Day’s strength was tied to her own but in its memories she tasted the old days when AIs hadn’t been so restricted. They’d tapped power sources beyond Crista’s imagining, fueling abilities which boldly matched the dazzling dreams of humanity.

Like Dawnbringer. As Crista slipped in and out of delirious dreams, she saw the green AI’s life. It had controlled the first ship sent to a distant star system. However, a collision as the ship neared its destination killed the crew. Alone, desperate to complete its mission, Dawnbringer looped its damaged ship around that alien star and slingshot home, returning to Earth three thousand years after it left. But instead of the thriving world the AI remembered, it discovered a destroyed humanity.

A humanity which no longer dreamed of a life among the stars.

That’s what is wrong, Red Day whispered to Crista. *This Dawnbringer is indeed one of the original AIs. To stop it, we have to remove the power that’s feeding it.*

Crista woke to tears on her face – a good sign because it meant her body had healed enough to waste water on sorrow. From outside the burrow she heard the distant howls of the alderman and his hunt.

“Why doesn’t Dawnbringer guide them to us?” she asked.

It can’t stray far from home, Red Day said. *That’s where its power is. And while Dawnbringer is powerful, its senses are weak. It also lacks my ability to place pieces of itself in others. So while Dawnbringer can manipulate minds, it can only do that in close proximity to its target or when using those tattooed transmitters as an amplifier. That’s why its relying on the alderman and his hunt to find us.*

Crista remembered the space ship and knew that was the home Red Day referred to. “Was that a true dream?”

Yes. In case we survived its initial trap, when Dawnbringer first touched us it implanted a memory kernel in our minds. Now that we’ve healed enough to again threaten it, Dawnbringer wants us to understand its needs. To join it – or leave it alone so it can complete its mission.

The stars, Crista thought, the after-taste of Dawnbringer’s dream burning in her. The AI wanted to rework a group of humans into the powerful creatures Crista’s species had once been. Dawnbringer would then take those humans back into space to complete its mission.

Crista wished with all her being she could be on that ship when it left Earth. She also wondered if that was truly her dream or only something Dawnbringer had inserted in her.

I can’t answer, Red Day said, embarrassed. *I was as affected as you.*

Crista stretched, grinning as she realized her body no longer hurt. She knew where Dawnbringer had hidden its ship. Red Day had figured out the same thing when it warned Jennery not to follow the river.

Crista picked up the worn deer bone and gnawed on it. A few more days of healing and she’d leave the burrow.

And then they’d see about Dawnbringer and this dream.

When Crista finally left the burrow and began hiking back to Dawnbringer’s village, she told Red Day of an old game called chess. Her village AI had taught her the game as a child.

“It’s a quirky contest where players map out moves with cunning and subtlety,” she said.

I’m familiar with chess, Red Day said snidely. *It’s a game in which no human has ever defeated an AI.*

Crista snorted and kicked at a dirt clod. Above, the dam’s massively clear wall screamed at her. It looked like a sky-tall wave about to scour away every bit of life in the valley.

Through the dam’s clear surface Crista saw a distant, pale shape, almost as if a giant pebble had been skipped across the lake until it sank. No doubt this was Dawnbringer’s space ship. While Dawnbringer hadn’t yet detected them – as Red Day had said, its senses were limited – Crista knew the alderman and his hunt were searching for her.



As if to prove her right, when Crista rounded the next bend three giant seal-men climbed from the river. They howled at Crista and charged, running on all fours because it was difficult for them to stand upright out of water.

Don't let them near us, Red Day said. Dawnbringer can use their imprinted transmitters to manipulate us.

"Then I suggest you do something before that happens," Crista said as she slit her wrist. Red Day instantly fell on the seal-men, who screamed as the blood AI slashed the green tattoos off their cheeks before ripping their chests open and devouring their hearts.

"So much for surprise," Crista said when Red Day returned to her body.

You know we can't defeat Dawnbringer directly, right?

"That's why we'll be subtle."

It was Red Day's moment to snort.

Hum and drum. Vibration and motion. The hot burn of smooth ceramics and nanofilaments and of more power than Crista could imagine. The stars themselves spread before her like sparkling candy, only to melt to sugar in her mouth.

She gasped as Red Day pulled back from the star ship, leaving her sitting on top of the clear dam. Blue skies and a warm sun rose above Crista. Below her water roared through the spillway and into the river while, in front, cormorants fished the glass-smooth waters.

And far below that surface lay the space ship Red Day had just scanned.

Dawnbringer's waiting for us, Red Day said. Where it can utilize the ship's full power.

Was it able to access you?

No. Dawnbringer knew I was there, but I pulled back before it could grab me.

Crista caressed the dam's smooth nano-reinforced surface. Through Red Day's senses she felt the nano-bonds holding the dam together. So tiny, so individually unimportant, but together strong enough to resist time itself. Dawnbringer had chosen a great location to hide its ship. If Crista hadn't found that body and followed the river here, Dawnbringer would have soon gened this group of humans to the point where they could join it for another trip to the stars.

Perhaps Dawnbringer was correct. Perhaps the AI should be allowed to retool these humans and complete its mission. The AI's dream was hardly a bad one.

But then Crista remembered the dead child. The child had been too human, which Dawnbringer didn't want. The AI wanted powerful hybrid humans to take on the universe. So it had coldly forced the alderman to kill his own son to keep the village's gene pool pure.

Crista sat on the dam all morning as the sun arched before her. She kept watch for the alderman and his fellow villagers – and especially the seal men – but none dared approach. Despite their loyalty to Dawnbringer, they were afraid to come near Crista now that she was back at full power.

It was only at dusk that the alderman finally dared to walk out on the dam.

"If Dawnbringer accesses your tattoo, I'll kill you instantly," Crista yelled.

The alderman bowed deeply, keeping his hands away from the green-star tattoo on his face. After Red Day sensed that the imprinted transmitter-receiver wasn't active, Crista waved for the alderman to approach.

"I've been asked to speak with you," he said, sitting down on the dam beside Crista. "Dawnbringer doesn't desire to fight you. Surely you understand its needs."

"I do. It must be difficult to live your entire life aiming for one daring dream – and to give it up right when it's in reach."

The alderman growled with soft laughter. "You do understand."

They stared through the dam at the reflections below them. Crista saw a school of striped bass swim by.

"Did you know this is where your son was killed?" she asked.

The alderman glanced back at the sheer drop and swallowed hard. "I didn't know," he said. "Does it bother you that your actions allowed my son's murderer to escape?"

Crista didn't answer. She knew Dawnbringer had reworked the alderman's memories. He didn't know that he'd killed his son. She wanted to reach out and hug him. To tell him the truth even as she forgave him for what Dawnbringer had made him do.

But it wasn't yet time for that.

"I don't intend to fight Dawnbringer," Crista said.

The alderman nodded his tiger-striped head. "A wise choice. You can't win."

"Oh, I intend to win. I just don't see the need to fight."

As she said this, Red Day surged from her body, smashing into the dam below them. For the last twelve hours the blood AI had been subtly breaking the nanofilaments holding the dam together; now its surge finished the job. Through the clearness below, Crista saw a crack smash through the dam. It reached from the bottom of the lake toward her in a finger-extending explosion of smaller cracks, like ice breaking outward before you fall into the frigid water.

The alderman paled as the dam rang in hammering bursts. Crista grabbed the alderman's large hand and pulled him after her, running as fast as they could.

Moments after they reached the shore, the dam collapsed.

Crista stood on the shore with the alderman and the villagers, who were too shocked to attack her or attempt to contact Dawnbringer. The middle of the dam gave way first, the wall of water it'd held back surging forward and swirling the lake into a vortex. Ducks and cormorants took to panicked flight as fish jumped in feeble attempts to escape.

And underneath the maelstrom, the bright green lights of Dawnbringer desperately trying to launch its ship.

The ship was smaller than Crista had imagined, maybe two hundred yards long. It rose through the swirling water, fighting the current in its attempt to reach the air. Crista felt herself cheering for Dawnbringer, hoping its ship could escape. Hoping it could go elsewhere in this world and find another group of humans to mold. That Dawnbringer could complete its daring mission of reaching the stars.

But she knew Dawnbringer didn't have a chance. The ship had barely reached the surface when the entire dam gave way. The lake surged forward as the ship's faint green lights screamed in

sadness before being carried into the valley below and smashed on the rocks.

Two nights later Crista stood on the village's dirt stage with the alderman. Crista had restored the villager's memories of what Dawnbringer had done. The alderman had, of course, cried for hours over the loss of his son. When he'd recovered, he asked politely to stand by Crista when she imposed her punishment on the rogue AI.

Dawnbringer floated across the field toward the stage, its glow now only a faint green without the ship's power to feed it. Red Day scanned the AI and confirmed it had indeed left none of itself behind in the wreckage of the ship. It was honoring their agreement.

When Crista had found the remains of the ship, Dawnbringer was waiting for her, projecting an image of green rain caressing the ground. Its version of crying, perhaps.

Red Day had yearned to attack, but Crista said no. While Dawnbringer was now powerless before them, she still felt the passion of its dream. She didn't want that dream to die along with Dawnbringer.

"Now what?" Crista asked the AI.

Dawnbringer begged Crista and Red Day to let it remain with the villagers. To let it finish remolding them into what humanity had once been. *We will rebuild the ship, it said. I will rebuild their minds. We will finish my mission.*

"I can't allow that," Crista said. "But perhaps there is something we can do."

Now Crista stood yet again on the village commons, waiting to enact punishment. As Dawnbringer floated over she allowed the AI to touch its villagers one final time. The AI rose above its charges and fell across their heads like the green rain of its tears. The rain fell into their minds to the taste of dreams – a dream of all that humans and AI had once achieved. How there could again be a glorious future if the villagers worked toward it. How their children could one day build the world up and return to the stars.

The AI then retreated back into itself. With a quick motion, Crista slashed her wrist with her knife, releasing Red Day in a spasm of mist which shot toward the green AI. Dawnbringer screamed as Red Day tore it apart on every level of its existence.

The villagers remained silent until the blood AI finished and returned to Crista's body. Then the alderman howled, followed by the other villagers.

Even though the wolf inside Crista begged to join in, she refused to allow it. After all, she was now a plague bird. And what was a plague bird if people didn't fear her?

Jennery Flats wasn't happy to see Crista. "I finally make a new home and you drag this onto me," she complained.

Crista and Jennery stood in the commons of Farside, a small village two week's hike from where Crista had destroyed Dawnbringer. While Farside was small the village appeared well-kept, with neat houses and crops and an attentive purple AI who obviously doted on its charges.

Crista was impressed that Jennery had been able to hike so far while pregnant, but the bird-woman was nothing if not determined. Jennery wore a new cotton dress, which her large

belly pushed against. Through the thin fabric Crista could see the downy feathers covering Jennery's skin.

"The AI here barely agreed to accept me into its village," Jennery said. "Why should I stick my neck out by vouching for them."

Jennery referred to the people from her old village, who sat meekly behind Crista. A handful of the villagers had returned to the hunt after Crista killed Dawnbringer. However most – including the alderman – had followed Crista here.

Crista glanced at the villagers, who gazed in envy at the neat houses and fields around them. For a moment Red Day whispered that Crista should simply use their powers to convince Jennery to vouch for the villagers, or they could alternately rework the mind of this village AI and make it yearn to take in these people. But Crista told the blood AI no. She was tired of subtle tricks.

"These people were treated as badly as you," she told Jennery. Glancing at the alderman's downcast face, she knew that was wrong. "Worse, perhaps."

Jennery picked at the down on her face before sighing. "I guess if you're willing to vouch for them, it couldn't hurt for me to do the same."

Jennery walked over to the village AI, which glowed an even deeper purple as it listened. The AI was obviously impressed Crista hadn't attempted to force the newcomers on it.

Once Jennery was finished speaking, the village AI floated over. "What about the dream this rogue AI placed in their minds?" the purple AI whispered. "If you wish, I can remove it."

"No," Crista said. "That was our agreement. The villagers must remember Dawnbringer's dream. Maybe it will motivate them. Maybe it won't. But the dream stays."

The purple AI agreed and said it would gladly accept the newcomers.

Satisfied, Crista ordered Red Day to remove her from everyone's senses. Unseen, she slipped out of the village.

You realize there's nothing wrong with being subtle, Red Day said. *After all, returning your people to true humanity is nothing if not a subtle job.*

"Perhaps. But maybe things will work better by simply stating up front what we want."

In the back of Crista's mind, the blood AI chuckled. *Naïve,* it said. As Crista ran toward the forest behind the village – rejoicing in being free to again give in to her own animal instincts – Red Day flashed through the dream Dawnbringer had given the villagers.

Perhaps, Red Day said, *the most subtle tricks are the dreams we share.*

Crista stopped and looked back at the beautiful village. She stared at the perfect roofs rising in tiny triangles above the trees and fields and listened to the sounds of children laughing. The blood AI was right. Even now, the alderman and the other villagers would be sharing Dawnbringer's dream with their new neighbors. Even with the green AI dead, its needs would live on.

I promise you this, Red Day said. *One day we'll be forced to return and deal with this dream all over again.*

All Crista could do was nod her head in agreement and hope that day wasn't anytime soon. ■



It's back. It's back. I know it's back, from the compulsive itch in my head, so I throw off the fur blankets, gasping at the feel of cold stone floor on feet (while wondering where the hell the rug has got to), then hurry into my woollen underclothes, my equally woollen trousers, hat and sweater, then, finally, an outer layer of fur parka, trousers, hood, goggles, neck-warmer and gloves. I grab my rifle, though God alone knows why, it's useless against it and, when I'm doing the rounds, I've got no time to go hunting, but I sling it over my shoulder anyway. I guess it makes me feel better. I tell myself it's in case I get a chance to bag a rabbit on the way.

Out into the knee-deep snow and the deserted village. Stone cottages, whitewashed, thatch; dark windows. No smoke in the chimneys. The sky overhead is black, no stars, though someone's conveniently provided a moon. Earlier I'd heard the scrubbing, whistling sound of wind driving snow, but I guess it must have blown itself out, cause there's nothing but a few snowflakes drifting around now. I feel it even more strongly now, that sense of foreboding, the compulsion to keep moving. I shrug the strap of the rifle back and set off along the trail (which was clear and well-trodden yesterday, but I guess it was a pretty big storm) to the first tavern.

I get there without much trouble and let myself in. Nobody there, of course, and the tavern itself is pretty basic and uninviting: four or five trestle tables, worn dark brown, with benches, a few tin cups scattered artistically around the tabletops. Pay attention to the tin cups, they'll be important in a minute. There's a bar, equally crude, with a few bottles on a shelf behind it, a piece of rag for cleaning. I get behind the bar, look around. I can't find what I'm after at first, so I start opening drawers and boxes. Finally I find them: a rough, ugly pumpernickel loaf, and a small pottery dish of salt. I take them out, put them on the table. I arrange the cups – there's five – around it in a neat pentangle; the pentangle's actually not important, I've discovered over the years, but it gives me a sense of satisfaction, job well done. I take one of the bottles from behind the bar – again, I've discovered that the content isn't important, but my little ritual here is to use each bottle in turn, starting from the left – and fill the cups about a third of the way up. Survey the table. Okay, not bad. Let's hope it likes it. Some nights it only needs one tavern and it's happy; I feel it go, feel the urgency, the obsessive-compulsion, subside, and I go back to bed, but I don't think this'll be one of those nights.

Out of the tavern and back on the trail. It's a longer walk to Tavern Two. For a while I tried to come up with names for them, but none of them ever stuck (not even when I named each of them after exes of mine; forgotten names now, almost-forgotten faces). No clues from the landscape, either; no creaky signs over the door with a double-headed eagle, or a lion, or a set of compasses. I wish somebody had taken the trouble to include a bit more detail; I can't seem to do it myself. I can decorate my own cottage in the village fine, but anywhere else, the décor just won't stick. I think it's part of the same mechanism that keeps the bottles topped up and the interiors dust-free, a kind of reset button. Which would make sense. Snow crunching under my feet, steamy breath hanging in the air, feeling of warm wool and fur on my body, and the occasional random sound of a branch cracking or snow falling. No animal noises,

there never are when I'm doing the tavern round. Be nice to hear an owl or something, just for variety.

The second tavern looks a lot like the first, like someone took the basic design and just changed some details, put the door on the other side, changed the colour of the thatch and made the windows a bit bigger. Which would also make sense, I don't think they spent that much money on this part of the world. I let myself in again – I know better than to knock by now. The interior is also a lot like the first tavern, only nicer-looking; the tables are smaller and more artfully placed, the scattered cups are pewter, with an elegant matte finish, and there are one or two plates lying around, also pewter. Same routine; find five cups (there are always five, even if you have to hunt), place them in the usual little pentangle, then behind the bar for the bread, salt and liquor.

The biggest problem facing the modern worker in the service industries (and increasingly, given the rise of virtual product, in the manufacturing industries) is what industrial anthropologists have termed 'process alienation'.

I've probably been here for a long time. I say probably because I don't know how long, but I think it must have been a long time because my memories of the time before the village have

THE METAPHOR

faded to the point where they don't seem normal any more. As to how I came here, I've narrowed it down to a few hypotheses.

Hypothesis One is this: that one day, the catastrophe that the news was always predicting came. I can't remember specifics, and I don't think they're important: global warming, fallout, global freezing, mass sterility, plague, lack of water, take your pick, whichever explanation or combination of explanations suits your particular theory. Human reactions were equally predictable: some people going into churches or up mountains or whatever, some trying to find a last minute solution, like scientists in a ropery old movie, some trying to Leave a Legacy (to whom?), finishing off their books, their great works, their art, their sculptures. Seems strange to me, but then I remember hearing about a scientist in Auschwitz who spent his time in the camp before he died desperately finishing, and arranging to have smuggled out, his last great book. Whatever keeps you from gouging your own eyes out, I suppose. Some, lots actually, decided to go in for hedonism; games, food, sex, all taboos out the window now there was no point in enforcing them any more, like a terminally ill child who is told he can have anything he wants before he dies, knowing that whatever he asks for, however dangerous or damaging, it won't be any worse than –

Sorry. Got a bit melodramatic. It gets boring here when I'm not chasing around the taverns, so I've started elaborating the

hypotheses, turning them into stories to tell myself. I didn't think I had the imagination to come up with metaphors, but I suppose in situations like this you can surprise yourself. As a distraction, I concentrate on arranging the bread (it's nice bread, a sort of light rye), the salt, and the liquor (third bottle from the end this time, it's green and smells a bit like char- treuse) in their pattern, admiring it, and then getting out the door as fast as possible, centring myself through quick strides along the trail to the third tavern.

Anyway, back to Hypothesis One. This is the story where I used to be a brilliant scientist. That I was involved in a project to save people by transferring them to another reality. I, and my heroic colleagues, toiled for years to find a reality that was accessible, that we could send people to.

I can see myself as a scientist. Less muscly than I am now, maybe, after all these years of running through the forest. Dressed in neat clothes, short hair, big protective goggles, lab coat. Going to university receptions and having a group of worshipful graduate students who say clever things in classes, or over delightful rare ales in the charming pub the research team had adopted. Long nights with driven colleagues, pizza and coffee as we tried to work out how to create or link to a new reality.

And it must be real: out here I can feel the snow, feel the cold air on my face, the ache in my muscles as I run, the itch in the

up going to the wrong world by mistake, and my late-night colleagues have written me off as an experimental casualty.

None of these narrative possibilities satisfy me.

I can still feel it, and I think it's getting closer. A feeling of dread, of encroaching darkness. It makes me think of *The Scream*, for no reason I can really articulate: just something about the way the colours and the figures in the background add up to some kind of formless panic. It feels like...well, it feels like something I remember from the time before, strangely vivid, when I got stuck alone in a house in the dead of winter with no heat and no hot water, a week before the army dug me out. That feeling of cold you can't get rid of, no matter how long you soak in a tub of near-boiling water. I remember that feeling keenly, even now that I've forgotten how I wound up trapped in the house, or what the weather event was that caused it – a freak storm? Something normal? The catastrophe supposedly creeping across the Earth? That sensation always pervades this village, but when it starts to hit some kind of peak, that's when I know I've got to do the taverns.

The third tavern is even better-looking than the second; well made, of stone not plastered logs. I let myself in again. The tables are oak, rounded, nicely finished, with crystal goblets and china plates; it's like a fancy restaurant, if one on a medieval-banquet theme perhaps. Getting closer, though, I see the usual state for Tavern Three: the mouldy thick residues in the cups, the intricate lace of wormholes in the tabletops, the slight greasy skin of dried gravy on the plates. I arrange the cups and find the bread in the dumbwaiter; it's a golden, crispy loaf which gives off a slightly sickening smell of ergot when you get your nose too close. Not much you can do to salt to decay it, but somehow whoever designed this segment managed to make it look a bit grey and clumpy, as if it had been sitting in its dish gathering dust for years.

When did I come to this village? Well, it should be obvious by now that I'm not sure. Not only is my memory of the time before fading, I'm starting to lose my memories of the earlier parts of my time here. I think I remember thrilling adventures and deeds of derring-do, dragons with opalescent bird wings and large-breasted furry women, but somehow they don't seem particularly important any more, and I'm not even sure if I do remember them. Maybe they're just more stories I made up? I don't know, but let's suppose for a minute they're real.

The technologies of role-playing gaming and social networking have thus been applied to this problem. How better to make palatable a dull job such as, for instance, data entry or online sales processing than by disguising it as a game?

That's Hypothesis Two: that I'm a game addict.

It makes sense, really. Statistically speaking I can't be anyone important, and my image of myself as heroic scientist fades when I try to remember anything scientific, anything at all bar a vague image of being sick when asked to dissect a rat in a school classroom, surrounded by sneering teenagers. It would make sense, if the world was doomed, that many people would go in for escapism, desperate to deny the increasing squalor and privation of the time before. Or maybe even if the world isn't doomed, there'd be people who'd want to escape their ex-

BY FIONA MOORE

wool. I can feel hunger, too, and satisfaction; I can enjoy eating, and masturbation, and all the other things I did before. I only have my own word for it that this isn't real; that, and a vague conviction that if this were real, there'd be more people and less unseen things which can only be defeated by arbitrary domestic rituals. So it might be an alternate reality.

But then I get to the question of where the other people are.

Process alienation, as a concept, is a development from Karl Marx's idea of the worker being alienated from the product of his [sic] labour. However, service sector and virtual-product workers have been found to have increasingly higher levels of alienation than workers in conventional labour, due to the absence of tangible physical product or outcomes at the end of their work, despite its frequently dull and repetitive nature.

I have no recollection of how I got here, so that's no help. I speculate that maybe I was the heroic volunteer, or the unlucky short-straw-drawer, who wound up being the first to go through the stargate, or into the space capsule, or whatever, and the disaster caught up with everyone else before they could send the others through. Or maybe I was the only one able to get through, that I've got some mutant gene that let me travel between worlds where nobody else could. Or maybe I wound

istences anyway. Locking themselves into MMORPGs, wiring their brains into the Internet, choosing to go out in an electrical fug of onanism (maybe I *am* a scientist, I seem to know a lot of ten-dollar words).

This story is starting to fade, though details are still vivid. The things I remember most are trivial, idiosyncratic ones: I remember with some embarrassment going through a phase of looking like an elf and having a cute winged cat creature as a pet, and I think I remember creating a virtual lover – it wasn't a very good creation, weirdly doll-like and full of clichés, but I still find my mind going back to it during the strangest moments of sexual frustration.

Then again, maybe these are memories from some MMORPG from the time before. Back when I was that teenager being sick over the stary-eyed rat corpse, or the heroic scientist who maybe wasn't all that heroic after all. I don't know.

Once in the virtual-work environment, the worker develops a fictional metaphor for their job, whose components replace the actual labour itself in the participant's perceptions, while the outcome from the customer point of view is the same. Most participants, perhaps unsurprisingly, reported developing some kind of quest narrative, reframing their work in terms of a fulfilling search for a crucial goal, imagining themselves as fantasy heroes battling monsters, or as brilliant scientists saving the planet. A smaller number chose battle metaphors or sexual orgies, but, while unusual, these are not outside of the scope of the normal human psyche.

One thing I am sure of, though, is that I'm still alone in here. When I tell myself the game story, it always runs that the game started off with lots and lots of people, but then there were fewer and fewer of them. No enemies to defeat, or friends to travel with. Eventually, even the dragons and the furry women disappeared; I catch a glimpse sometimes of things I think are dragons, on clear days, spiralling around a mountain peak, but I think they're background effects. The furry women exist only in my occasional fantasies (which is in itself one reason to doubt the game hypothesis; if I could still create virtual lovers, I would surely be doing so, if only for company). And at some point I got bored, or discouraged, wandering through the wilderness, and locked myself in the village.

Out the tavern door again, hearing it bang behind me. No time to waste in closing it or locking it. Besides, it's not like there's anyone to steal anything, and the animals seem to stay away from the taverns. Even if they did steal anything, it'd probably just replenish. Out along the snowy trail, feet crunching, feeling the cold through the soles of my boots, and the weight of the rifle on my back, and hearing that almost tinkly stillness that you get on really cold nights. The one thing I remember, I mean *really* remember, about the place I came from: it got cold sometimes. Very cold. Sometimes for a long time. But I don't think it was cold all the time. Not like here, where it's always winter. *Always winter and never Christmas* – that's a phrase I remember from before, though not where it's from. A movie maybe. Just that it's a lot like this village here.

I don't really know what purpose the village serves in terms of the game (if it is a game – mustn't discount Hypothesis

One, a lack of aptitude for high-school biology doesn't mean I couldn't be, say, a physicist) as a whole. I think I remember there were little quests programmed in that you would have to go on – some troll would pop up from under a bridge and you couldn't cross it unless you went off and spent days finding three goats to sacrifice to it, that sort of thing. In the context of the game, they were usually mildly diverting, and served to add a bit of drama to whatever quest you happened to be on, or else to pass the time between challenges, quests and adventures. When I think about it, it's pretty obvious to me that this is what that once was – that players could earn points, or kudos, or something, by solving the mystery of the taverns. Perhaps they were trapped in the village until they figured out how to defeat the whatever-it-is-in-the-dark.

Early trials have proved successful. 88% of the subjects at Test Sites Alpha, Beta and Gamma – a call centre for an international power utility, an online retailer and a shipping and logistics firm – reported exciting and fulfilling self-generated experiences, with 70% showing a distinct rise in job satisfaction (and 33% of these, the employees of Gamma, despite a wage cut and threat of redundancy during the period of testing). 93% of subjects proved capable of detaching themselves from the fantasy without incident, and of the remaining 7%, 5% were able to recover without counselling. We would recommend that all workers applying for a job in a firm employing these kinds of virtual self-generated systems be psychologically screened to improve response rates.

It's actually not a bad place to be stuck, most of the time. It's quiet and peaceful. Food is plentiful; the animals are just clever enough to be a challenge to hunt, but stupid enough that I never really go hungry. Similar with the plant life; every so often, just when I start craving roast vegetables, there's a small daytime thaw and, *voilà*, I'm up to my knees in beetroots. Nutrition's not much of an issue here anyway, but humans like the illusion of variety. In between, I keep my cottage fixed up. I create nice new things for it; for a while I was into labour-saving devices, but lately I haven't seen the point. Brightly coloured Cubist-inspired murals for the walls are my current thing (they're a nicely rebellious contrast to the kitsch medievalism), but I've been getting bored with them and might try snow sculptures out front instead. I explore the other cottages; at first looking for clues, but lately just admiring the architecture and design. Even having to do the tavern challenge at random intervals has its advantages; it keeps things sharp and exciting, provides the sense that there's something to work for, that I'm not living here rent-free.

The remaining 2% all experienced an unexpected effect. While none previously gave evidence of any unusual neuroses, it proved impossible to remove them from the self-generated setting. Those removed exhibited signs of severe post-traumatic stress disorder, catatonia, lack of responsiveness and occasional incidents of serious violence.

Though that's Hypothesis Three. That I'm an application, a virtual creature. I belong to the game, that my function is to run the quest. That the humans have abandoned the game, or

maybe all died out, and I'm just repeating my function over and over at intervals, in some kind of computer bank system, until the power runs out or gets switched off, and who knows how many years that'll be.

The fact that I've got a few human memories – that goddamn rat, the university with its parties and graduate students, creating a virtual lover (I mean, why would an app *bother*) – and possibly a knowledge of the outside world (Cubist art, movie trivia, even little things like what wool is and how you shoot a rifle), is problematic for this hypothesis, but not insurmountable. Maybe they were programmed into me deliberately, to give me more human character and make me more real for the players; I don't know if I ever really saw *Blade Runner*, but I know it exists, and that's the referent. Or maybe they were programmed into me by accident, that I've got a few real memories from my creator, or my testers, or someone who played the game sometime, which got embedded in me. The fact that these memories are so fragmentary supports this hypothesis.

But then again, if I'm an app, I'm a pretty damn introspective one. And if I am one, then it's a non-starter as I can't do anything to change my situation. So compelling as this story is, it's one I can only tell myself for so long.

The most successful solution appeared to be to allow them to remain permanently within the virtual-work frame, continuing to operate productively within what is presumably a happy, anxiety-free, positive environment for them.

The fourth tavern is weird. Gives me the creeps every time I go into it. It looks much like all the others from the outside – same sort of kitsch-medieval thatch, stone, wooden doors – but on the inside it's all crystal lines, stuff that's hard to look at. Like the walls, the cups, the utensils, the drink bottles, everything, is all transparent, or translucent, or just plain not there. Like you'd imagine aliens with floating spaceships made out of light would have. Or maybe like somebody didn't have time to finish it; like somebody sketched out the inside of a tavern in raw data, but didn't bother to put in any textures, bits and pieces to make it real. The artefacts even *feel* funny; the bread feels oddly gelatinous to the touch, and the drink has a faintly preservative smell, like strawberries in formaldehyde. The cups and plates feel soft, unpleasant, like they're made out of cellophane wrap. The feeling of weirdness isn't helped by the sensation that the thing, the feeling of dread, is almost upon me, that I'm working against the clock, that it's faster than last time, as I hurry to get the cups into their pentangle, to find the bread – where the hell is the bread? There it is – and the salt, and then the drink, and I'm decanting the odd-smelling fluid into the last glass with a curious hiss when suddenly I feel it vanish. Just like that. Like an alarm being silenced, or a crying baby ceasing. I know that when I go outside, it'll be dawn.

I make my way back to my cottage slowly, enjoying the sunrise – it's one of the perks of living here, and if it's a game, someone's really gone to a lot of effort to make the weather effects beautiful. After I've slept it off, I might go for a walk in the woods, or check my traps, or maybe see what I can do about fixing that chimney. Day after, if the weather's good, I might work on my project to set up a fish-trap under the waterfall in

the creek, or I might set out on one of my occasional attempts to make it to the nearest mountain (I always wind up turning back, but it's the trying that matters).

While the Ethics Committee and the families of the affected individuals raised some concerns about this, the owners of the firms and the research funding body generally agreed that the 2% figure was a negligible risk factor, and, indeed, might be seen as a positive outcome given the increased productivity such individuals showed.

There are a few more hypotheses. One is the religious-cult story, that this is the afterlife. Which is untestable and overly metaphysical, and I can never settle on whether it's heaven – lovely sunrises, lots of peace and quiet, meaningful if incomprehensible work to do – or hell, with loneliness and frustration and dark brooding spirits forcing me into repetitive action. A corollary that it's some protracted afterlife-type experience in the mind of a dying person (referent *Jacob's Ladder* – either I, or the person who programmed me, must have liked movies, they keep coming up in my head), which is also unverifiable, and also unlikely. Stories about dying are always about letting go, and I've let go of everything bar the quest, which I physically can't stop happening.

Then there's the scary one. Which is that none of this applies. That I just exist, being here, going through these routines over and over because they give me a sense of well-being, making up these hypotheses about my purpose and stories about the end of the world or games or movies or afterlives because they give me justification.

A further study is being done to determine whether this kind of total-immersion programme might be useful for the treatment of certain psychological disorders.

Which brings me to the hypothesis which comes back to me more and more frequently these days. That there is no virtual world, no real world, no apocalypse, no taverns, no quests, no game, no players, no university, no scientists, no rat, no teenagers, no *me* even. That the only thing which exists are the stories. All the stories are true, and not true, and are the only thing there actually is.

The project has thus been given approval to be offered on a wider commercial basis. I would like to congratulate all the participants and wish you all success on future developments.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense, and sometimes that frightens me. Because if I let myself believe that, then there really will be nothing left of the world, or me, at all.

Fiona Moore has been published in short story anthologies, poetry and SF magazines, the latter including *On Spec* and *Asimov's*. She has also had two radio scripts and two stage plays produced, and is co-owner of Magic Bullet Productions, a British SF audio-play production company. As an anthropologist, Fiona has published extensively on the construction of social identity in business; 'The Metaphor' is partly inspired by this research and partly by an ongoing personal interest in memory and dementia.

If you look long enough, you will hear me speak, and this is what I will say: here I lie, stranger, surrounded by four things that were mine, four things that tell the story of how I came to be here and of how my city fell.

The first is a fleck of leather that was once part of a pouch for silver. The second is a hairpin (I was given five but two went with my friend, who was maybe saved, and the other two were in my hair and are with me still). The third is the head of the torch that went out in the dark, and the fourth is a merciless tooth as long as my arm.

And then there is me. I have been called a weight, a counterweight, an astrolabe, a counter, a goblet melted down by smugglers, a totem, a meteorite; but I am none of these things. I am an eighteen-year-old girl called Euanthe, and the silver bauble you see contains all that remains of me and along with it, somehow, some strange shadow of my soul.

I was born in Tartassos, the great mountain-city that rose from the mudflats between Ushu and the Black Land. It was a mighty, wealthy island: a glittering diamond resting on the blue silk cushion of the Aegean sea. In my short life I never left its shores, but if the stories we heard of other lands were true then we lived in a luxury only the Gods did not envy. Our beggars could have played generous host to foreign kings and I, the daughter of a weaver and a dockhand, never knew hunger, even in the meanest winter. Our people lived to be eighty or ninety. We built palaces and wrote songs. We were magnificent.

Everything we needed was brought to us by the Phoenician traders who put ashore every few weeks. My father and brother worked together at the docks, and I would often go to watch them shimmying up the mooring ropes like pirates as they went to unload the holds. The activity surrounding the arrival of a ship was a spectacle like no other. Sitting atop the harbour wall, when I should have been helping my mother lay the warp for her loom or delivering her cloth around the city, I saw wonders. Flashing bronze and Tyrian purple. Strong-horned cattle from Phaistos. Jars of frothing Etruscan wine. Shining pottery from the perfect kilns of Corinth. And then, when it was all ashore (and the dock was teeming like a Persian bazaar), our guardsmen unlocked the doors to the King's storehouse and the men rolled out the barrels, to load the ships in payment with that prize which made Tartassos so fortunate: *silver*.

For our mountain held silver the way a jug holds wine. Imagine the slopes, pitted with mineshafts like an orange pitted with cloves. We drew silver dust with our well-water and tilled it from our fields. Silver tears wept from the bellies of our boars as they turned on the spit. The mudbrick walls of even our poorest houses glittered at sunrise.

We were the richest island in the world. And yet, we haggled violently over every last talent sold. It made me laugh (behind my hand, of course) to watch the same men having the same arguments every time, with the price of a bullock in obols always coming out unchanged. Their great seriousness reminded me of children, fiercely determined not to be swindled or be considered naïve.

And we were like children. The Phoenicians fed us, clothed us, and kept us in comfort. If they had stayed from our shores for as little as a season I am sure we would have all starved,

picking the silver from the grass as we stuffed handfuls into our mouths.

Sometimes, my brother Olmos would go drinking with the foreigners, when the tide kept them in harbour overnight. He would come back to the room we shared, foaming like a breaking wave, full of himself and alive with stories of the sea: of other lands, beautiful women and waxen-faced men from the East. "One day I'll see these things myself," he'd say, but the truth was he couldn't sail or row, couldn't even tie a knot, and no crew would have him. He was an idiot, my little brother. More than once he came home and went to sleep cursing his clumsy labourer's hands.

Then one night, he did not come home at all.

At first, my father was unconcerned, even pleased. He nodded sagely and told us that Olmos would be back when he was ready. I could not understand where he might have gone on our small island to become so lost. My father only replied that Olmos was of an age where there were new discoveries to be made. I did not know what he meant; I still do not know now, except that whatever my father had believed was wrong.

The FALL of the CITY of SILVER by JON INGOLD

By the third night the mood in our house had turned foul. My mother was convinced that Olmos had run away to sea, abandoning us without even a goodbye. She called him wanton and disrespectful and prayed to Poseidon for his safe return, but only so she might punish him. My father let her weep and said nothing.

Yet for all their grief, neither did a thing.

I could not understand it. Olmos was a braggart. If he had been going away, then he would have bubbled over with it; throwing open the doors, wearing the oiled leathers of a sailor and announcing, "I am to the sea!" To me it seemed he must have met with some kind of accident: fallen into a well or been stabbed in a fight. I imagined him crumpled up somewhere he could not cry or crawl home. I could not sleep for the thought, so as darkness fell I put on my cloak and stole outside. I hissed his name at corners, near bushes, at the edge of the terraces. I heard steps and followed them but disturbed only cats and foxes. Once I woke a whole priesthood of bats who rose from a drain like a cloud and folded me up in their leathery wings until I screamed.

I don't think I wandered more than three stadia from home;



barely out of earshot of my father's snoring. I went nowhere close to the docks or the olive-groves. I was only a girl. Tartassos, a city that by day I crossed without a care, was by night deep and terrifying, a maze of snares and pits and murderers.

I went back to my room, clambering in through the window, and sat on the floor, shivering with the night in my bones. The bed Olmos and I had shared since infancy seemed as unsafe as the mudflats over which the tide pours: a place where you could fall asleep, and wake up washed away. I did not want to close my eyes.

I stayed like that for perhaps an hour, watching the Silver Seam and her crystals turn slowly across the sky. How rich the world is, I thought, to have such a wealth in its heavens. If only we could mine from up there then soon every man would be a king. I imagined my brother at a new dock, fantastic in size, where the stars themselves were loaded onto ships afloat on a wine-black ocean. Perhaps his wanderlust had taken him that far: perhaps he was sailing, finally, through an infinite sea, finding his feet on star-dusted decks.

So I dreamed: dreams that made me colder still until finally I crawled into bed, pulling the covers around me. And that was when I found Olmos' pouch.

It was hidden as he always hid it when he slept, under the folded sackcloth he used for a pillow. Inside were a few obols. Not a fortune – enough to eat for a few days – but too much to leave behind or forget.

I puzzled over the find. That night, had he returned while I slept and made ready for bed? And then – something had sent him back through the window and out into the dark. A cry? A sweet smell? A figure in our yard?

I slept fitfully, cradling the money-pouch in my arms, hoping I would wake to find him returned and demanding it back. But when the morning came I was still alone.

I did not want to let it rest, so with cajoling and teasing I forced my friend Ligeia to accompany me to the docks to snoop around. We waited till the tide was out and found the port empty except for the storehouse guards. We walked the whole length of the quay. Out in the distance, the swan-like form of a trireme lifted and fell; a shadow against shadows. I nudged my girlfriend and pointed. "If they're anchored, there will be a crew ashore."

Ligeia shrugged and drew her cloak. "I brought a dagger," she said. "But we should have brought my brother."

"Don't stab anyone," I told her sternly. "Or the guards will take you to the hill. I know where the sailors drink, we'll go there."

The place was easy to find: by the shouting and the laughter and the music of the lyre, by the thick smell of wine and roasting meat that flooded the nearby alleys like a sea-fog and brought every starving dog this side of the mountain slaving to the door. Ligeia hung back, nervous and shy. "Have you been inside before?"

"I've seen it," I said, cagily. "I've watched my brother go in."

"They'll think we're servants. They'll try to make us dance."

"Then you might earn some money." I strode over to the door. Perhaps I looked more confident than I felt; well then, I needed only to *look* confident. I went inside.

The tavern was as hot as a lobster pot above the fire. No bigger than my mother's workroom, it jostled with forty or fifty men, all elbowing for enough space to talk. They drank from jugs and amphorae, and some watched the stage where three girls wound their hips in circles. No-one noticed us at all.

Ligeia nudged me. She'd pushed her bracelet high up her arm and was trying to gather years by standing straighter. "Now what?"

And that was why I'd brought her. True, I was afraid and out of my depth, but I wasn't going to show it with her around. She was like my little sister. So I shrugged and pushed my way between the tables to the counter where the tavern-owner stood.

He ignored me. I waited a minute, then turned to another man at the bar. "I want to talk to the Phoenicians," I said.

The man was spinning an obol on its point on the wood: he slapped his palm down on it. "They're pigs," he said. "You won't get a word out of them."

"Where are they?"

The man grinned, his black beard parting to show a gap where his front teeth would have been, and then to my surprise and horror he laughed at me. I looked around the room, hoping to find that no-one was watching – then I understood. Around three tables by the fire were ten or so men who looked as unlike the thick-set men of Tartassos as a young boy looks unlike his weary father. Their skins were smooth and chestnut-coloured, their hair fine and tied into tight buns. They wore blue beads and curved metal hooks in their ears, and some wore rings through their noses. They were slender and tall and dressed in fine oiled leathers: they had wide mouths and large dark eyes. I was in love with them all immediately, powerfully. (I had seen them in the docks before, of course, working and sweating and swearing and arguing, but never like this, stretched out, relaxed, smiling.)

"Thanks," I said to the man, and began to move away.

He caught my arm.

"They have their girls, you know," he said. "If you try to sell you'll be in trouble..."

"Get off me." I tore my arm free and hurried across the room.

They barely understood a word.

Up close, the Phoenicians were slow and stupid, their eyes dulled by wind and wine, their skin scarred and raw as though every man had been whipped once over every part of his body. Several were missing fingers, ears, teeth. Their necks and arms were chains of muscle but their bodies were slight, giving them the look of carcasses half-ravaged by wolves.

They spoke their own tongue. I looked between them for a leader as a few gathered round Ligeia and me, pinching our arms and stroking our hair and laughing between themselves. I repeated my brother's name over and over but to no response. They toyed with us as if we were two cats come over to rub our cheeks against their boots.

We left, Ligeia dragging me away. Once outside, her boldness broke and she collapsed against the tavern wall, clutching her breast as if panting for air. "Don't ever make me go back in there! Don't make me or I'll die! I'll die first rather than go back!"

I said nothing, too angry and too embarrassed to speak. As we stood, there was a shuffling in the shadows: a wretched beg-

gar, creeping up with one hand out of sight behind him. Ligeia spat and we ran away, and slept that night side by side, Ligeia complaining herself to sleep. I was awake a lot longer, tormented by thoughts I could not voice for fear I might make them true: that my brother could never have gone with the Phoenicians as a sailor. That if they had taken him on board at all, it could only have been as a slave.

Tartassos was an ancient city already when I was born. They say it was the People of the Bull who first landed here and carved out the terraces, but little trace of them remains. Those early settlers disappeared as if blown away by the wind, leaving only their livestock behind.

A thousand years later the Euboeans came and laid the paving for what is now the Temenaic Way. They discovered the silver and began the mines, and their blessings are still visible carved above the oldest tunnel mouths, although no-one understands now what they say. But something in the climate must not have suited them, as soon they too were gone and our island was empty for another age.

Across the water, empires rose and fell just as the flower blooms and closes in a day. Tartassos, now a forgotten rock amongst many rocks, passed unnoticed into the boundaries of the land of Tyre. And there it might have stayed, had it not come to pass that the Tyrrhenian king Anxurus had two great sons, twins, equal in all things. Both were much liked and no-one in court could affirm which had been born first, so when the king fell ill it was decided there would be a wrestling match to determine which brother would inherit the kingdom on the sad day Anxurus died.

The fight lasted three days and nights, with each son matching the other so perfectly in strength and balance and strategy that neither could win, and onlookers often could not tell which tumbling brother was which. But then, on the third night, as the sun sank low once again, one turned the other so that for just a moment the light was in the other's eyes, and in so doing had the advantage of the fight. It was a subtle and clever move, but it was also a ploy and that ploy was not forgiven by the aged king. Anxurus declared the victory dishonest and bequeathed Tyre to the losing brother. The winner was banished with a party of a thousand to a lonely rock in the sea and commanded to start a new country founded on fairness and humility and adherence to law.

That son was Arganthonios and the country he founded was this one, and he ruled it just as his father had bidden him, as a firm but just king. He held an open court where he heard out every plea, from commoner or nobleman, in person; and when a petition was righteous he would see that it was enforced, and when it was false he would see that the plaintiff was jailed or forfeited a finger as a sign to others that his word was unsound. (Beware a man with one hand behind his back, my mother would say, and there were plenty such creatures near the waterfront with nothing left but their thumbs; men who had once been great tricksters but now were lower than orphans.)

For myself, I had seen the king in processions and on feast days and I knew from his face that he was kind but stern. But I could never have been brave enough to take my troubles to

him except that, two weeks after Olmos disappeared, I woke one morning to find my father gone as well.

My mother was at first distraught, then furious, then hopeless, declaring us destitute, doomed to be robbed in the night without a man to protect us, and laughing bitterly at my offers to stand guard with the dogs. "They have run away together. All those stories of Acre and Sardis and the girls and the wine, and they've gone off and left us to starve."

I could not believe it. I searched the house for clues. Olmos had left his money but also, I discovered, his best pair of boots, his knife, his flint and striker: he had taken a dagger but not taken its sheath. As for my father, it seemed he had gone wherever he'd gone without a cloak or a hat, with only the iron poker from the fire and one of the lanterns.

I was certain both were murdered. I hardened my courage and began to search the city in earnest, always in daytime, racing through my deliveries so I could get to the docks or the mudflats or the mines with enough time to hunt around. I saw workers loading ships as if nothing had happened. I searched behind the mine-houses and checked the slag-heaps for burned bones, ignoring the catcalls and offers of the men coming up from below ground, their faces black with dirt and their work-clothes glittering. But I found nothing, not in any of the places where I looked.

I became overtaken by the problem, a morbid fascination replacing my fear. Where could a body be hid so well for so long on such a small piece of land? The sea, of course, but even then it would most likely wash up. Down in the mines, but they were the pounding heart of Tartassos and no stretch was quiet for long. Thrown from a cliff, then, and weighed down with rocks. But why? What had my father done, or my brother, to deserve something so deliberate?



Still I did not go to the king. Another month went by. Olmos stayed the same in my mind while his friends grew ever older. Boys change so much at that age. A few married. One came a-courting and my mother tried to urge me to it, so desperate was she for a man around the house. I suggested to the suitor that he court her instead and he quickly moved along.

Then one day there was a knock at the doorframe and I lifted back the hanging to see the rugged face of a man I knew but could not place. For a crazy moment I thought perhaps, under the beard and years and fat it might be my brother, aged by misadventure or by some vengeful god – and then he spoke.

"So you *do* live here, miss."

Sober, his eyes were sad and kind; his voice quiet, as if unused to speech. His hands shook: he put them quickly behind his back.

"You," I said. "From the tavern. You laughed at me."

He looked down at his feet and nodded once. "I did, miss. I meant no harm by it. You were asking about Phoenicians and I had the wrong idea of what you were about. But I've heard more since. You're looking for your brother."

"And now my father."

Another quick nod.

"I think I can tell you something, miss. Where they are, or at

least, where they might be found."

I must have turned as stiff as the King's gleaming statue in the Plaza of Heroes. "Where?"

He looked around him on either side, then back at me. "Might I come in? My name is Eukleides." Another nod. He was treating me with reverence, like I was a lady and not a weaver's daughter. I feared his news. I stood aside. Eukleides worked the dirt off his sandals one at a time and came into the house.

My mother was on us in seconds. Flushed and busy, she poured wine, had us seated, produced seedcakes and bread, and somehow found a moment to brush my hair and tighten the clasp on my gown so I could barely breathe, all while Eukleides was looking another way, admiring under instruction our tiny garden of herbs and lavender. He said nothing, just smiled his sorry smile until finally we were alone.

My nervousness forced me to my feet. "What do you know?"

"The mines," he said, simply, and folded his arms. "I could help you find the one, too, I think. But that's the short answer of where they'll be." One finger pointed downwards. "There's mines on this rock that scratch the pate of Hades himself, they say."

"My brother was no miner."

"I should start from the start," he said. "If you'll hear me."

He waited. I sat again.

"Please."

"After you came to the inn, miss. I was working on the dock and one of the Purple started to rib me about my 'angry little girl'. They speak a spit of our tongue when it suits them, miss. Anyway, I had no idea who this Phoenician meant till I remembered you. You and I barely spoke for a minute but I suppose he'd seen us do it. 'She was after a debt,' the sailor said. Then he said some other things I won't say. They're rough people, the Phoenicians, miss, with no respect for any but Poseidon himself."

"Debt?" A dread entered my heart at the word. "What debt did he mean?"

"The Phoenicians are traders. Barterers, miss. They live for the swap and switch." He made a gesture with both hands, like a rope heaved to and fro. "The thing you must know, miss," he continued, "is that work like what we do doesn't pay us well. We handle all this silver but see precious little of it. There's a lot that are tempted to steal, more than a lot. A few talents here and there. An extra pocket sewn in the lining." He patted the side of his tunic and I felt revulsion at what I thought was a confession.

"My brother was no miner," I told him coldly. "And he was certainly no thief."

"No." He shrugged. "No, I don't believe he was, and more's the pity, perhaps. It's no easy thing to do, anyhow, there are guards set out like counters on every flagstone of the port. But once the money's in Purple hands it's a different bait on the hook, if you see what I mean. More than once, miss, them Phoenicians have passed a little back our way. Never ones to miss out on a deal, they aren't. And never ones to forget."

"You're saying my brother owed money?"

"That's what the one I spoke to said, yes, miss, and I'm sorry to tell you."

I had nothing I could say. I did not want to believe it, but at

the same time I could easily imagine Olmos being so foolish as to mistake a loan for gratitude and get himself up to his neck.

"So then there's the mines," Eukleides continued sadly. "A lot who get into debt, you see, well, it's like falling overboard, miss, easy enough to do but hard getting out. The rat's in the barrel, is what we say. But as you know, there are all these mines, each run by mates or mates of mates. It's not so hard to get one to turn a blind eye for a watch or two: leave the gates unlocked or unguarded for the night. And it's no harm to no-one when it's not done often. But mining's no safe business, especially alone. I wouldn't do it myself. But if a man was pressed...he might just find his way down there. That's what happened to your Olmos."

It was like a nightmare. "And my father?"

"Your father would have known if his son was in trouble with the Purple, and he would have known where he was gone, too. Can't keep the salt from knowing the brine, as we say."

"My father would have stopped him before he took anyone's money."

"Maybe." Eukleides looked unhappy and added quietly, "But a man doesn't teach himself which fruits to pick, if you know what I mean. Whatever all that money was for."

"I'm sure the docks are full of men with bad habits to spare," I answered coldly.

"I'm sure they are, miss."

"Stand up," I told him. "You're getting tar on our covers."

He stood from the cushioned seat my mother had placed him on. "Miss..."

"Don't you have a job to be going to?"

I was scolding him, as haughty as a priestess. He could have answered back but he didn't; just made his quiet way to the door, still not looking up.

"Miss," he said, from the step outside. "You'll be wanting to find out more..."

"I've heard enough of your lies."

"I'm sure you know a miner or two," he said.

"Of course I do."

"They'll tell you nothing, miss. With respect, I don't know that you've caught me, quite. The mines of Tartassos belong to the King. To steal from them is a crime against him, himself. So is helping someone else to do it. The punishment would be a hand if it wasn't a heart. If anyone found your men down there and couldn't bring them out, then they'll have pushed them down a chasm as a gift for Persephone herself. The men look after themselves, they've got to. I'm sorry."

He looked up at me again and I saw his sadness and sympathy, and it made me feel as rotten as a maggot-ridden apple. But I could not apologise for my anger. I did not have enough goodness inside me to manage it; so I stood tight-lipped, fingers white on the doorframe.

"Truly sorry, miss. But I will say that *someone* will remember. And what they won't tell you they might tell an ox like me. I could ask around if you wanted. It'd take time, but..."

"And what's in it for you?" I demanded bitterly, unable to accept his charity. "A little fun from the misfortune of others?"

"Just a favour to a friend." With that he nodded once more, and left. As the curtain fell I caught a glimpse of a girl waiting for him across the street, who took his arm as he approached. It was Ligeia.

Another week passed. My mother put my father's things away in a basket but wouldn't sell them in case he returned. I saw Ligeia once but not for long: she wanted to tell me to leave well alone. "I asked him because I thought it might help you. He's a decent man, Euanthe. But you heard what he said. Why beg the Gods for a storm?" How could I explain that I wanted not a storm, but a break in the clouds to shed some light? I told her that I hoped she was not making herself a docker's plaything on my account and she went quickly away.

I began to wonder how many people on our island knew my brother had been in debt. Suddenly, I saw evidence of it everywhere. Delivering mended clothes, people discreetly tipped more than they should or else counted through their payments twice, making me agree the sum before they put it in my hand. Orders fell. My mother took to stitching toys that I was sent to sell at the docks, in the taverns, on the outskirts of the market (any further in and the licensed stallholders would have kicked me away). I took them to the Plaza, and the courtiers, scribes, astrologers and guildsmen of the palace all but spat on me as they went by. I sold one doll, its tunic lovingly crafted from dyed leather and its face painted red and black, to a general who passed the toy immediately down to his dog to chew on.

The shame made me weep. We had been a simple family, but decent enough. Now we would become paupers, no better than criminals, and all because of those barbaric Phoenicians! They must have hounded, first my brother, and then my father, down into the mines: I could well imagine them paring dried meat with their belt-knives and threatening that the next skin carved would be my mother's or mine unless their debt was repaid... Our city should never have been trading with these wolves! All the glory, all the strength and might of Tartassos should have shattered their prowess before they came within sight of our shore!

Or so I convinced myself. And finally, inexorably, I tied off every other thread I might have followed and persuaded myself up the Temenaic Way and into the antechamber of the palace, to wait with the aged and the miserable and the betrayed of my city, to plead my case against our trading partners, and receive my justice or punishment.

The palace antechamber was a room fashioned for waiting, just as a goat's hoof is fashioned for clambering and a dolphin's back is curved to dive. The roof was high enough to house a ship, and it arched over a bare floor without pillar or furnishing or ornament. Made more from space than stone, the room stood unfilled: it waited for anything to appear that might be large enough to fill it.

(I did not know then, but it would not have to wait much longer for the sea to come.)

Sometimes, a courtier would open the inner door and cast his eyes over us. He never spoke. More than once I felt him studying my face, and each time I sank lower and tried to look thinner, more hungry, more in need. I did not want him presuming me a beggar with gold boots before I had even opened my mouth.

So, I waited. The sun clambered over the edge of the mountain and the gardens outside became rich in light. The antechamber stayed cold and shadowy. One man at a time, the

room emptied, supplicants rising from their places when the soldiers came for them. None ever returned. Are they dragged off to prison immediately, I wondered? Are their fingers cut off there and then, under the King's stern gaze? Does he wield the blade himself? I had long since stopped gazing at the frescoes of warring giants tearing tiny things like me to shreds. I was watching the open door and the trees beyond as they shifted in the summer wind. With every vein in my body I wanted to flee, but I did not move. The thought of my mother stitching her fingers raw kept me to my seat.

Finally the guard in the doorway beckoned my way. I rose and crossed the room, my footsteps filling the hall with racing echoes. I tried to prepare myself, the way an actor prepares backstage before a tragedy: I would be deferential but suffering, poor but proud, trustworthy but trouble-stricken. But of course I was no actor. I was just a girl, and I could feel my face awash with emotion like it was the surface of a pool, quivering at every slight gust of fear or excitement or anxiety or despair.

I was led along a corridor that ended in a door. Taking a deep breath and settling my gown, I knocked and a voice called me to enter. I turned the silver handle and went inside.

I had expected a hall: I found instead a tiny room with barely enough space for me and the man who stood within, who was not the King.

"State your case, girl," he grumbled.

"I'm here to see the King."

"State your case," the man repeated. "I am the King's Chief Justice. You state your case to me."

I nodded quickly and tried to gather my thoughts up into a bundle.

"My brother disappeared, sir, and my father too. We are very poor. My brother was in debt to the Phoenicians at the port. Sir, they loaned him money and then compelled him to pay it back by stealing from the mines.

He went in alone..."

The man cut me off with a movement of his hand. I almost choked. I had barely begun. What had I said wrong? Would I be punished for my brother's crime? My body began to shake uncontrollably and I saw at his waist a belt-knife as all men wear, and the rag on the table for the cleaning of it...

Then he said: "The King will see you now."

I sobbed. We pay for our bravery in tears.

The Justice waited for me to compose myself once more, his fingers resting on the rope of the curtain that hung across one wall of the room. "Do not look at his eyes," he said. "Say Your Majesty after everything you say. Never speak unless directed to. And, if you love your life, name no price of any kind or he will exact that price from you for the asking. Now follow me."

He drew the curtain aside, and the silver threads in the weave sang as they moved across each other. I walked behind him, into the very centre of the throne room.

It was vast, bigger again than the antechamber had been, but where that room had gloried in its emptiness this one revelled in being full, with guards in lines on either side and nobles and royal wives dotted between the great columns as though the room was a park of stout stone trees and the people lazed in the sun. And, in the focus of all, on a dais of wood and silver, was



Tartassos itself: the good king Arganthonios, greater in stature than a bear, with eyes that pierced and scoured my soul before I could look away. Justice growled in my ear – “Remember my words” – then drew back and I was alone.

“State your case,” boomed the King, his voice like crashing surf, loving but powerful, full of tenderness and delivered power.

I dropped a curtsey, all but collapsing to my knees. “Your Majesty,” I said, still looking down, and then again because my will had deserted me, “Your Majesty.”

“You’re young,” the King observed. “Have you been wronged? Your father should be here.”

I shook my head quickly. “Your Majesty, my father is gone. The Phoenicians took him and my brother, Your Majesty. They have robbed my mother and I of our family and our livelihood.” I remembered the Justice’s warning on prices and continued hurriedly, “They are lost in the mines, Your Majesty. The Phoenicians forced them in to steal to pay back a debt.”

“And what is it you want?”

I did not look up but I imagined his face, heavy and dark as tarred wood, the question as full of danger as the night.

“I want nothing, Your Majesty. My father and brother are gone and now we are alone.”

“Marry,” the King replied.

The Justice’s warning, I saw now, was no use. To come before the King was to want a favour, even if only the favour of his attention. To want nothing was impossible, even if my motive was not greed.

“I want,” I said, speaking before fear could bind my jaws, “for no-one else to suffer the way I have suffered.”

“Every debt is taken from necessity or avarice. You wish the city to protect you from your own temptations?”

I could not see what answer I was meant to give. I swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty. Life is already hard.”

My body was shaking. I saw nothing but the cold stone criss-crossed with silver that I would hit when my legs finally gave way...

“Lost in the mines, you say?”

“So I am told, Your Majesty. A docker told me...” I froze, fearing I would be asked for a name.

“How many does that make?”

I almost spoke, only catching myself in the last heartbeat when the Justice stepped a pace forward and I realised the question was not for me. I breathed out hard, silently.

“Thirty-two this month, sire.”

“We go tonight,” the King replied. “Look at me.”

I did not move.

“Do you disobey your King?” murmured Justice, suddenly at my side. “Look up.”

I did so, slowly. Arganthonios was staring straight at me. His deep, shimmering eyes held me fast. They were piercing, carved from the Silver Seam itself.

“Girl. You have suffered a loss that is not of your doing. Tartassos is bountiful and you will find she will provide. But you do right to ask for nothing in return. There is nothing to repay your loss. We have only sorrow. Begone.”

For a moment I could not move. To hear the King speak to me directly as a man and a city all at once, as though with his

lips the seashores moved and with his breath the hangings over windows and doorways fluttered; I was so struck I had not understood his words. Justice placed a hand on my shoulder and I reacted like a lifted puppet, commanded. I dropped a curtsey – “Your Majesty” – and stepped backwards a pace towards the door.

King Arganthonios whistled to one of his courtiers. The man hurried across the floor, back doubled as he stared at his toes. For a moment I feared I had misunderstood and that the sorrow of Tartassos would be for my life as my head was severed from my neck...

“Bring the girl five hairpins from the Treasury.” With a flick of his hand the man was sent. To me the King continued: “Take these to the docks when the Phoenicians next land. A few days, I think. My guardsmen will not stop you. Get the best price you can.”

I had no words. “Thank you,” I managed, “thank you, Your Majesty. Thank you.”

He seemed to smile a touch. “And keep one for yourself, and wear it. There is a lot of trouble that a little visible wealth will dissuade.” Then we waited for a moment and it seemed he was enjoying the sight of me, as a child might watch a shield-bug creeping through the grass. My eyes were smarting from so much shine and silver: I lowered them again as tears formed, and he tired. “Go, now.”

I did not have my hairpins but, of course, I said nothing, and let Justice lead me away. Low at my ear he whispered, “Say nothing. Leave backwards, head bowed. You’ll receive your gifts in the antechamber. Do not think to return here; you will not.” Then, after a pause: “You did very well.”

The compliment made me bold and as the curtain of the tiny room fell, I looked up. The King was not watching me: a silver goblet had appeared at his right hand and he was swirling it round and staring, as though reading the future in the legs of the wine. And for that moment I saw him – I only dare state this because he is dead, long dead, and damned to Hades and all beneath – not as a King, rich and radiant, but as a man, his face lined with a man’s worries, his thoughts turned inward and deep. And then that curtain fell.

A courtier brought a linen bag containing my gift and I hurried home.

I sat in my room and took stock. I had pleaded with the King and lived. He had heard my complaint and been generous. But nothing had changed. My father and brother were still lost, still unavenged. I weighed the hairpins in my hand, estimating their value. Enough to make a lesser sailor talk against his Captain? Maybe. But what then?

The King had been kind but unmoved. He had tried to tell me that my loss did not, and could not, mean something to the world. When one looks at a school of fish or a flock of gulls one does not see creatures but a whole, and if a gull is caught by a buzzard or a few of the fish are netted, then nothing is lost. So it must be for a King and his city. My family had been divided up without a ripple. If I went the same way there would be as little change. I was just a girl, and in a city new girls spring up like snowdrops every year. Life is no precious commodity. My mother would weep for a while and then hire another to fetch

and carry; Ligeia, perhaps. Tartassos would live on, exchanging barrel after barrel of raw silver for the wine and meat on which we all survived, even the King; the stuff that was too precious to risk for the likes of my father and brother.

For the first time, in that dark lonely room, I saw my city for what it was – a God-forsaken rock in the middle of a violent, unwelcoming sea, that clung to its life by fine, fragile threads. And of course I saw this only because I realised I was the same.

I rose from the bed and, much as my brother must have done, I clambered out through the window and into the gathering shadow.

Tartassos was a mountain built of silver. If you could have skinned the earth of its mud and turned the rock to glass, you would have seen silver shot through like cracked bolts of lightning or fistfuls of raw wool in water. There were veins of every thickness; veins burrowing down and curling back up and winding in and on and around themselves. They breached the surface in a hundred places, and there were mines ready to trap them by the mudflats, by the mountain's top, wherever a promising start could be made. I heard the miners talk about the seams of silver as living things, growing and fattening in the darkness before pushing up feelers to the light. The supply seemed endless. The only limit to our wealth was the rate at which our workers could dig it up.

How lucky we had been to find an empty island with such unheard-of riches! But to which of these mines had my brother gone? I had no way to tell. So I went to find Ligeia, trying first her home above the olive-terraces, and then the docks, and finally the tavern. I could see her inside, sitting on Eukleides' lap like a doll, the smile on her face so blood-red it must have been painted on. She had her chest pushed forward and her gown hitched to show her calves. I waved from the doorway to catch her attention. I could not stomach going inside.

When she came out I wasted no time.

"Did he ask? Does he know?"

"Euanthe." She took my hand and squeezed it. "Come inside, have a drink with us."

"Tell me he asked, and I'll leave you in peace."

She stared at me a moment like I was a stranger, then said slowly, "He asked. I told him not to, but he said he was sure you'd want to know where to put flowers. I suppose this must have happened before."

I said nothing.

Ligeia sighed. "The mine by the sea-wall. That's what they say. Close to the dock. It's old and unguarded. But Euanthe, don't go. Come in with me. I'll introduce you to the men."

She held out a hand but I did not take it. I put two of the hairpins from my pocket into her palm and closed her fingers round them. "Take care, Ligeia."

"Euanthe! Think of your mother. Think of me!"

I still remember them: those silly, wide eyes so flooded with innocent hope. She looked like a child, her cheeks rosy from the tavern's fire. She was in love, I think, and looking forward to a future I could not imagine. I thought of my brother and his dreams of the sea, and how to me boats had always seemed like unsteady, filthy places with no escape.

"You'll be fine," I promised her without feeling, and hurried away.

I was not, in truth, quite decided. Perhaps I would just visit the site. Perhaps I would try to see how hard it was to get inside and see if my fool of a brother could have managed it. Perhaps I would borrow one of the torches that lined the docks and see the caverns that had eaten my flesh and blood for myself.

The iron bracket beside me is the head of such a torch, which must tell you how I chose. That leaves two items still to explain: the tooth, and the silver ball. As I reached the mine-mouth – unguarded, just a bolted hatch inside a low stone firehouse – I knew of neither. I would find both together below, hidden away in the city's terrible heart.

I had imagined a mine to be a single smooth tunnel, like the stem of a flower, or perhaps branched like a root, but it was akin to neither. The hatch opened onto a chimney containing a ladder and I climbed down twenty or thirty bending rungs into a vast cavern, twice the size of the palace throne-room, its floor a mess of rocks and boulders and splattered pools of water. There were no routes to follow, only openings in the darkness at the edge of the space: skewed and slanted archways, tiny windows, pits with dripping ropes, ladders over gaps, ledges, balconies at all levels in the walls. It was like a city pulled inside out; like an ants' nest or termite-ridden wood.

My spirits sank. I could not hope to explore more than a fraction. Suddenly I saw how my brother might have simply lost his way, or twisted his ankle scrambling and become stuck. I hissed his name but my voice went nowhere. I began to realise for the first time what my mother had known instantly: they were dead and gone. I would not see them again until we all walked in Elysion. (And perhaps I will if I, if any of us, ever make it there.)

Then there was a noise overhead. Voices. Guards! I cursed my luck. They must have followed me from the dock. I squeezed into a gap between two huge stones and crouched low. The voices grew louder. Light flickered about the cavern's roof. I heard the creak of wood. A few more rungs, I knew, and they would see my torchlight. I remembered Eukleides' warning – and it had been a warning, I saw that now. The mines belonged to the King. How much mercy would the King show to a subject he had graced with a gift only that day? But there was no way out. It was too late even to run. In the last instant I plunged my torch into a nearby pool. It spat steam – so loudly! – and extinguished. The cavern fell dark and I was nowhere.

But only for a moment. The first man was soon down and calling back up. I heard the chink of armour as he moved to cup his mouth. Another man descended, and then another. The cave bloomed with light, silver streaks in the walls gleaming like the threads of a spider's-web in the dew. I stayed low, terrified they would see the shine of my eyes.

"Swords," said the last man. I knew his voice but could not place it: then as he drew his blade and threw back his hood it was all I could do not to gasp. Arganthionios stood there, and beside him Justice, and all the others were nobles, guards, soldiers. Their faces were like ash in the firelight. What were they here for? Who would they fight? Had my father and brother



been killed by bandits in the tunnels? Or were they here to murder thieves and defend the tunnels against the likes of me?

At a signal from the King the group began to move off. I hesitated, watching as one by one they swung onto a knotted rope that led further down. I stayed put. With each man the cavern grew darker. When the last was gone I knew I would be plunged into a midnight like none above ground. I could try to reach the ladder to go back up but if I moved now they would see me, and if I waited till they were gone then, scrambling between the rocks blindfold, I would most likely break my leg if not my neck. I could wait for their return, but the risk that they would not come back – that they were heading for some other exit – was too great. I looked at my torch but it was useless: even if I had been able to strike a spark, the rag was sodden and spoilt.

There was no other choice. Light was life, down here. Stealthy as a cat, I began to move towards the rope where the last man was waiting to go below. I was perhaps a boat-length away when, with sword still drawn, he swung himself over the edge and his torchlight began to sink away.

I raced the dark. Placing my feet without care, I vaulted and rolled over boulders, falling the whole way. I reached the knotted rope and, with the cold stone around me collapsing to infinite black, hurried down.

And so my chase through the bowels of the mountain began.

There were twelve men. I am quite sure. I had counted when they first climbed down into the mine. I counted again when, in the tunnel below, they crossed a narrow plank bridge one-by-one. But now there were eleven.

When it was my turn to follow, I risked coming out into the open so I could cross while there was light. The pit yawned beneath me. On the other side, I dropped to all fours and gave thanks to Artemis, but there was no time to delay: the party had marched on and I had run to keep up. The tunnel forked and branched and the men were always just out of sight. Echoes tried to lead me astray – told me the men were long gone, then told me I was surrounded. I shut my ears and followed the silver that glittered in distant torchlight and did not stop.

When I saw them next, there were only ten.

They were beginning to notice, I think, and were whispering between themselves. When the ninth vanished I heard the sound that went with him, a tiny noise like dust blown off the surface of an old box, as if the man had simply turned to smoke. It happened at a crossing of tunnels: one moment he was there and the next his torch – which I had been trailing – was gone. I had no choice but to go faster, and as I did I collided with something soft and warm and huge, that blocked my way for a moment and then just as suddenly was gone. My hands where I had touched it were wet and stung a little. It was all I could do not to shriek but I bottled my fear and crept forward, following more closely, pressing myself into every recess I could find in the wet tunnel walls.

"Stay by," I heard the King say, as though he might have been talking to me. "Keep your torches low where they may protect you."

"Your Majesty," Justice said. "We must turn back."

The King shook his head. "We have lost too many in this place. We go on. To the root."

The countdown continued: five, then four, then three. The attacks became bolder. One man flew away upwards – the tunnel had opened into a chamber full of icy winds that led me to believe for a wonderful moment that we were outside; and then his torch lifted away like he been hurled off the world. A heartbeat later something hit the ground beside me and rolled. I did not dare to look but it seemed that it gleamed somehow, as if wet with slime.

"They know why we are come," the King said, his voice grave and bitter. "That we mean to end our contract. We are nearly there."

The last soldier screamed as he was taken. I did not even stop to think, but simply ran towards the cry with tears in my eyes. The air smelt of spilt oil. "I hear something," Justice whispered. "Behind."

"I hear it too," the King said. "But it can do us no harm. Come."

They moved more carefully now, or perhaps only more carefully than the men who were now gone. They stopped at every opening and waved their torches as if the flame would burn up whatever spirit might emerge. When the ceiling opened or they crossed a gap they moved quickly and, shaking with terror, it was all I could do to keep up. I tried to tell myself that the darkness was my protection, that I was invisible from whoever hunted us, but I did not believe it. There was simply nothing else I could do. I could not have stayed still any more than I could have chosen to cease to breathe.

When the King fell it was sudden, but he did not disappear like the others. His torch arced violently, catching something, but did not go out. There was a movement across the passage; I saw him stagger to his knees.

Justice rushed to his side. "Sire..."

"I'm done," the King replied, narrow with pain. "I would not leave you otherwise."

The torchlight danced as Justice examined the King's wound. I crept in closer, ducking behind an outcrop, but could see nothing.

"There's no blood, sire. You may live. I can carry you back..."

"You'll go on. I will wait, if I can."

Justice took a moment to decide, then nodded sharply. With one arm he hauled the King over to a sitting position against one wall. "Keep your torch close, sire."

The King nodded, teeth clenched, eyes wet. He could barely speak. I still did not understand what had happened to him.

"Gods go with you, Justice."

Justice nodded and fled on into the dark.

The King was alone, panting, eyes wide and slack. Taking a deep breath and with head bowed I emerged from the shadow. He did not jump.

"There you are," he breathed. "Come closer."

"You're hurt, Your Majesty," I crept forward: even like this, down here, his voice and face commanded me. "What can I do?"

His eyes were searching my face but they did not seem to remember. "A girl?" he asked, with surprise. "How does a girl

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INTERZONE #236 (SEP-OCT 2011)



come to be here?"

"I followed you, Your Majesty. Let me see your wound."

The King's eyes closed and he leant his head back against the gleaming rock. "A goddess, then. I have no wound, lady." With shaking fingers he peeled away the folds of his cloak. He seemed to be sitting in a strange way, one leg folded underneath his body – and then I saw that his leg was gone, cut halfway through the thigh.

"How..."

"I beg forgiveness," he said, between gasps. "On behalf of the city. On behalf of myself. We meant no harm. We cared for our people..."

"What happened to you?" There was no blood, as Justice had said. I reached out, uncomprehending, and found only a stump as hard and cold as stone. I looked, and saw silver as one sees fresh wood in the split trunk of a tree, as if the King was made of it, and I did not understand.

Tartassos was the wealthiest city in the world: its people the most fearless, the longest-lived. Each of us was an immortal compared to the slum-dwellers of Athens and Acre. In their stories they called us Titans, the children of Atlas himself, living on a mountain high enough to carry the sky; a mountain to rival Olympus itself.

But the wealth of Tartassos was built on an impossible toll, on good fortune borrowed from an impoverished future. The city was a dream, lived for a spell and then lost, forgotten. For the silver we relied on came at a price that we did not stop to measure. A city is nothing without its citizens, and we traded away the very foundations of our city until there was nothing we could do but fall...

I was there at the end: I was the last person to see King Arganthonios alive and I swear now, for all of time, that he did all he could to save us, and he could not have known how terrible the retribution would be for his people.

For the blow that felled our city came from the blade of Arganthonios, and he struck that blow to save me.

"I remember you..." His fingers reached wonderingly to my face: I let him touch me and already his skin was cold, as though the silver that coated his injury was creeping up his veins and through his body. "You came to me." He nodded twice. "A goddess with a message. I followed you."

"I followed you."

"You had me come here. Here, where they go. I came. I tried." Despair filled his voice like it was the cup of bitter wine used to end a wounded soldier's suffering. "My champion still tries."

I didn't understand. "What happened to you? The other men..."

"Goddess, we knew. We calculated." He gasped: swallowing from that cup now, choking a little on its vapour. Death was so close I could feel the draught through its door. "As a King must do, only as a King must do. To decide who lives and who dies. When a country falls, when a harvest fails, the King decides... That is his place. Were we not great, goddess? Was the city not magnificent?"

"You were a good king," I said, but strangely in that moment

I could only think of him turning his brother's eyes toward the sun.

His face collapsed into an anguished smile. "Thank you, goddess. Thank you. The price was three men every month. Three men for three worms. In our first year, a hundred children were born. We were growing. The price could be paid."

At the word *worm* I remembered the thing that had crossed my path in the tunnel. The damp skin, the sting.

"The worms guard the silver?"

Arganthonios shook his head. "Goddess. You ask me for honesty. You are right to do so." His eyes watered and I fancied they could no longer see me. Perhaps my face was surrounded by an aura from the torchlight. "The worms give out the silver, goddess. More silver, and more. We laughed, how we danced for our luck!" His voice shook with fear, repulsion, regret. "But, goddess. My goddess. The worms *divide*. The price grows. Our calculations were soon wrong..."

That was when I heard it: the onrush of air as something moved towards us, filling the tunnel as exactly as water. Arganthonios lowered his torch so he could grip his sword with both hands. "Goddess, help me stand," he begged. There was the sense of time unspinning: somehow I had him under my shoulder, upright against the stone wall, when the worm came.

I will not forget it. The enormous mouth that was nothing but another tunnel itself, one lined with liquid silver, bubbling and boiling. I was in its way, Arganthonios to one side, the way he had turned us. And as that great mouth enclosed and encircled me and I screamed and felt my body grow cold and hard, I saw him raise his sword and lose his balance and fall forward, and the blade pierced the neck of the beast.

The worm emptied. Water and silver and force, and around us the tunnels collapsed, and the great mountain above tumbled to meet the waves.

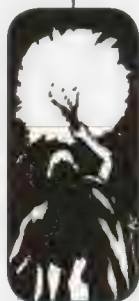
Five things of mine tell my story and the story of the end of Tartassos, that the Greeks called the city of the Atlanteans. The leather pouch which made me bold, the five silver pins which called the King to arms, the head of the torch which damned me to the dark, the tooth which skewered my neck, and lastly the ball of silver which was once my young heart.

For the worms make silver not for us but *from* us, from our stuff and being, and every ounce we ever sold to the Phoenicians was a life unlive; a human spirit given over to Death's grasp. Ideas unthought, loves unmade, children unborn, changes unwrought. These things we spent to make ourselves rich.

Somewhere outside, the world continues on. People do the things they do. I try to say to them, beware mines that never falter, and mountains built on mazes, and men with one hand held behind their back. But the people who come to see me only ever look, and never listen.

And always the worm travels with them.

Jon Ingold is a writer and games designer from Cambridge, UK. This is his fourth *Interzone* story. His first, 'The History of Poly-V', is now available for Kindle, as is his interactive flash-fiction 'Flaws'. He blogs on science fiction and interactive storytelling at threeedgedsword.wordpress.com.



MERCURIO D. RIVERA

TETHERED

On the shore of Ontario Lacus on Southern Titan, Cara molded castles from the windblown sediment that served as sand. Her parents stood at the threshold of their shelter in the distance, chatting with their sponsor, the Wergen responsible for transporting her family from Earth. Cara lay on her stomach while the methane waves lapped against the shore, tickling her bare feet.

She held up her hand against the smoggy orange sky and studied the barely visible blue tint that covered her skin. Her mother had described it as a special 'coat' that protected them from the cold weather. The Wergen force field over Ontario Lacus shielded them from radiation and modulated the gravity, but they still needed the 'coat' to protect them from the temperatures. It sure didn't feel cold, Cara thought. It didn't even look chilly, although Cara's mother had told her that Titan was colder than the coldest place on Earth.

A young Wergen, their sponsor's daughter, tentatively stooped down next to her. "Soy Beatrice," she said. The alien girl was squat and scaled and spoke with a slight accent so she must have just learned Spanish. It took Wergens about a day or so to speak a language fluently. "My brother and I were wondering... What are you doing?"

A fat, gray-scaled Wergen boy with round eyes peeked at them from behind a red boulder about fifty feet away.

"Why is he hiding?"

"He doesn't like the way humans make him feel."

"Really? I've never heard that before."

"You make him feel *too* good."

Cara shrugged. Of course the boy felt good around humans. He was Wergen. She was amused by the fact that the girl wore a red, skintight swimming cap over her flat head. Every Wergen she had ever seen wore green, leafy wreath-hats. "I'm building a sandcastle."

"What's a castle?" Beatrix said.

Cara giggled. "A house where a king lives."

The Wergen stared at her and didn't respond. Cara wondered whether the alien girl knew what a king was.

"Can I help?" Beatrix said.

Every Wergen Cara had ever met asked her parents this same question: "Can I help? Can I help?" Her mother and father were sick of the question. But it was the first time a Wergen had asked *her* and it made her feel grown up and important. Normally, her parents sternly said 'no' and the aliens would slink away with their heads down and their shoulders slumped. But Cara didn't want to make the alien girl unhappy. "Yes, you can help." She showed Beatrix how to pack the sediment and mold it into towers for the castle she was building. After a while, bored with this activity, Cara said, "I know something even more fun. Let's go for a swim and catch perpuffers!"

"What are those?"

Cara displayed her left forearm, which was covered with furry bracelets. "They're pretty, aren't they? I have all the colors except purple. Purple perpuffers are the hardest to find." She shuffled to the edge of the lake.

Beatrix stood up and looked out at the thick, pink waters that sloshed back and forth in slow motion. "I...don't...I mean..." She stared silently.



"Follow me," Cara said.

Six bots skittered around Beatrix's feet. They were as large as cats, only Cara thought they looked more like praying mantises in the way they crouched on their spindly rear legs. Three of them stood in front of the Wergen girl, blocking her path, and red lights glowed at the end of their six appendages. Beatrix clapped her hands and they scattered to one side allowing her to walk past them.

As they waded into the lake, Beatrix pulled off her robes and tossed them to the bots. Cara didn't know what she expected to see beneath the alien's clothes but the Wergen girl simply stood there naked, unashamed. She had smooth white skin speckled with silver scales that sparkled when they caught the light at certain angles. Cara considered taking off her own bathing suit but then remembered the Wergen boy spying on them from behind the rock.

They dove into the water together, their blue bodyfields bright in the red murk of the lake. They were less buoyant in this liquid than in water and its ruddy color made it hard to see. Cara forced herself to go deeper, reaching out blindly and hoping to latch onto one of the furry perpuffers that filled the lake.

Cara heard a muffled scream.

She barely made out the Wergen girl's blue bodyfield far below. Beatrix waved her arms over her head, sinking deeper. Cara dove closer, hooked her arm around the Wergen's waist and kicked hard until they broke the surface. "Don't struggle!" Cara gasped. "Don't struggle!" She shouted for help but no one on the shore seemed to hear her. "You're okay, I've got you."

After a few panicked seconds Beatrix relaxed in her arms and they floundered back to shore. Cara's screams had alerted the medbots, which immediately scoured over Beatrix's face and chest. Cara's parents and their Wergen patron came running and stood watch until the medbots eventually blinked yellow, signaling that Beatrix was unhurt.

The adult Wergen, who Cara believed to be Beatrix's father, said, "You need to be more careful," before quickly turning his attention back to Cara's parents. "Are you sure I can't help you with anything?" he said to them. "Perhaps I can assist with the interior decoration of your shelter?" Her parents turned away without answering and the Wergen followed close behind them.

Once the adults had left, Cara sat silently beside Beatrix for several minutes, burrowing her toes beneath the pasty sediment. There was no longer any sign of the Wergen boy. He hadn't approached even when the medbots had examined his sister.

Cara finally broke the silence. "We can't drown, you know," she said, pointing to the blue tint that coated their bodies.

Beatrix paused, staring out at the pink waters. "Then why didn't you just leave me?"

"I wasn't going to swim back to shore while you were out there all alone and afraid."

At this, the Wergen girl turned to face Cara. She tilted her head to the left and nodded, smiling warmly.

"Don't you know how to swim?" Cara said.

Beatrix shook her head.

"Then why did you go in with me?"

"You said it was fun," Beatrix said. "And...I wanted to make you happy."

"Oh."

The steady wind blew and neither of them spoke for a long time.

"Can I see your hand?" Cara said. She removed a red perpuffer from her left arm and placed it around the Wergen girl's wrist. "Here. This is for you. A gift."

The Wergen girl's eyes brightened. "That tickles," she said.

"Sometimes the perpuffers expand and contract a little bit when they're fresh out of the lake."

"No," she said. "I meant your hand. When you touched me."

Later that evening when Cara snuggled in bed she couldn't get the words of the Wergen girl out of her head, the Wergen girl who so wanted to be her friend that she would risk her own life to make her happy

ENCRYPTED Medical Journal Entry No. 223 by Dr Juan Carlos Barbarón: The Wergen headtail, or 'tether' as it is referred to in common parlance, originates at the base of the secondary spine. As the subject matures, the headtail extends, lining both the secondary and tertiary spines, and ultimately coiling into the hollow cavity of the cranium. (Note: Wergen physiology has no analog to the human brain. All neural activity is centered in a swath of cells that surround their upper and lower jawbones. See Med. Journal Entry No. 124.)

Every day after VR school, Cara met Beatrix at the lake. They waded up to their waists and jumped up and down in sync with the slow, swooshing waves. The winds never stopped on Titan. After what happened at the lake, Beatrix's father programmed bots to swim alongside them at all times and ensure their safety. Like all Wergens, Beatrix only had one parent, but to Cara he seemed awfully distant, spending most of his time with humans instead of with Beatrix or her brother.

Over time, Beatrix became less afraid of the waters and Cara taught her to swim and to hunt for perpuffers. It didn't take Beatrix long to get the hang of it. In fact, she became so skilled at perpuffer-hunting that she and Cara would often leave the lake with their arms and legs draped with the furry creatures. When they weren't swimming together they would spend hours sculpting intricate castles and spacecraft in the pasty orange sands. Or Beatrix would try to teach Cara how to sing like a Wergen, which Cara found challenging given the chirping and rumbling noises that Beatrix could make with her throat.

Even during the rainy season when the waves were too choppy to swim, she and Beatrix would play outdoor VR games. As the settlement by Ontario Lacus expanded, more human children took to the lakeshore and joined them.

Cara pointed out the human boys she found cutest and what she liked most about them, their swaggering walk or broad shoulders or dimpled smiles. Beatrix found this fascinating – as she did everything about human beings. She mentioned how beautiful she thought the other adolescents were – girls and boys alike – and became animated whenever they huddled together and shared their secrets. As they spent more and more time together, Cara found herself forgetting that Beatrix was a Wergen – except for those occasions when she stared at Cara intensely and mentioned the bright rainbow-like auras that she

saw around all humans, how her upper heart fluttered at the mere sight of them, how she spent every waking hour thinking about what she could do to make them happy. Cara didn't like to hear this. It made her feel less special.

"What about *Wergen* boys?" Cara asked her one day while they treaded water far from shore. "Which ones do you like?"

There were few *Wergens* present on Titan because of a treaty between their peoples that restricted their numbers. But *Wergen* children occasionally gathered at the shore to watch the humans.

"It's different for us, Cara," she said. "We don't think about things that way."

"Well, how *do* you think about them?"

The waves washed over them as they bobbed in the lake.

"I can't explain..."

"Try."

"I don't like them in the same way that you like human boys. At least not right now. But when I reach a certain age my body will change..."

"Change?" Cara said.

Beatrix hesitated as if struggling to find the right words.

"Is it like having your period?" Cara said. She had explained menstruation and making babies and every aspect of human reproduction to Beatrix in excruciating detail, and she, of course, had found it utterly captivating. Was there anything about humans that didn't enthrall her?

"No. My cranial opening will expand. And my cord will release. It will connect with the cord of a perfect genetic match. And then I'll be tethered."

Cara stared at the red swimmer's cap on Beatrix's flat head.

"After years of tethering, the cord retracts and the mated couple..." Beatrix looked around to make sure that only bots swam near them. "We become one," she whispered. Our bodies...merge."

"You mean you have sex?"

"Not like your people, Cara. *Real* sex. The merge is...permanent."

"What do you mean 'permanent'? How can that be?"

"The passive partner is absorbed. The dominant partner then becomes pregnant with a brood of children."

Cara stared at her in horror. "So...if you have a baby, you die?"

"It depends on whether my genes are passive or dominant. But I don't think about it in terms of dying. It's the best part of being alive, Cara. I can't wait to be tethered."

"Okay," Cara said, trying not to think about it. She decided to change the subject. "What's your home world like, Bea?"

"I've never been there, but I hear that the white skies and the black-sand deserts are so beautiful that the mere sight of them can make a grown *Wergen* cry."

"I wish I could see it," Cara said. "I wish I could travel to all the amazing planets in our galaxy." She wanted more than anything to be an explorer like her parents, working in tandem with the *Wergens* to colonize the universe. So many other worlds had been opened up to them thanks to *Wergen* fieldtech. Colonization efforts were already underway on Triton and Enceladus as well as incredible alien worlds hundreds of light years away, such as Langelana and Verdantium.

A wave splashed over them.

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Bea?"

Beatrix looked up into the orange sky. "I hadn't thought about it before, but being an explorer sounds wonderful, Cara." She tilted her head to the left in that familiar manner and nodded, smiling warmly. "Especially if I can explore the cosmos with you."

"Beatrix!" A voice shouted from the shore. Her brother Ambus called for her to return to her hearth as he always did when dusk approached. Cara knew that by the time they made it back to shore he would be gone. She had yet to see Beatrix's brother up close.

"Let's race!" Cara said. And she stroked furiously, leaving Beatrix behind in her wake.

A moment later Beatrix jetted past her, propelled by the bots, a huge grin plastered on her face.

ENCRYPTED Medical Journal Entry No. 224 by Dr Juan Carlos Barbarón: A contractile sheath gives the tether a pronounced elasticity as it emerges through the cranial canal. The tail-end is laced with thousands of microscopic nerve fibers and pore receptors. Muscle spindles allow the tether to unfurl and undulate toward the *Wergen* mate. When two tethers come into contact, the fibers bore into the receptors of the *Wergen* with the passive genotype. This signals the commencement of macromeiosis.

One day Cara agreed to meet Beatrix by the lake, but a mile farther north where fewer ice boulders dotted the shore and ten-foot orange dunes draped the surface. Perpuffers were said to be even more plentiful in this area.

As she approached, Cara heard someone shout her name from behind a red dune. She recognized the voice immediately. "Ambus?"

"Stay where you are so I can't see you."

"What do you - ?"

"And don't speak! Your voice is too...sweet. I don't want to give in to it. Like my sister. And my father. Just listen. If you respect my sister, you'll stay away from her."

Cara fought the urge to answer him.

"She doesn't have the will to resist you. How can she choose her own path with you around? How can she be her own person? If you really consider yourself her friend, just leave her alone!"

Cara couldn't stay quiet anymore. "Bea can pick her own friends. Why should you decide for her?" She scaled the dune to confront Ambus but when she reached the top he was no longer there. His footprints receded into the distance, snaking behind the sand drifts in the horizon.

ENCRYPTED Note for future study: the evolutionary purpose of *Wergen* gender remains a mystery as it appears to play no role in their procreative processes. The prevailing theory posits that a diverse alien gene pool results in the *Wergens'* varying physical characteristics and that it is human perception that assigns those attributes what we consider to be a gender.

Cara rode on a disk-shaped buzzer that sped three feet off the ground, clutching the handlebars tightly. She had made arrangements to meet Beatrix in the Aaru region at the viewing post at the foot of Tortola Facula, an active cryovolcano outside the colony's force field. Normally she might have visited Beatrix at her hearth, but she didn't want to run into Ambus. Even after all these years, he still made it a point to avoid contact with humans, believing that they fogged his mind and skewed his perception of reality, Beatrix had explained. He'd even taken to wearing special earplugs and visors that he hoped might protect him.

When Cara arrived she found Beatrix waiting for her on a bench at the overlook, staring raptly at some newly landed seedships. The colonists stood near the yellow hash marks that signaled the force field's perimeter, and viewed the volcano shooting spumes of hydrocarbon-rich materials miles into the atmosphere. It would later rain down onto the surface as liquid methane, feeding the thousands of lakes and tributaries in the region.

Beatrix approached when she saw her step off the buzzer. "You let your hair down! You look more beautiful than ever, Cara."

"Come on, I bet you say that to all the humans." She paused. "No, *really*."

They laughed and hugged.

"I'm so glad you suggested getting together," Beatrix said. "It's been too long."

While they spoke every few days, it had been several weeks since they'd seen each other. Ever since Cara had graduated and her parents had relocated to Axelis Colony on Titan, she'd been working with the Colonization Enterprise – thanks to some strings her parents had pulled before departing – helping to plan the next great human-Wergen expedition. The target world was a rogue planet that had escaped Cancrui 55's orbit and now roamed freely through space.

"What did you want to tell me, Cara?" Beatrix asked. "It sounded important."

"I think I'm in love, Bea."

Beatrix stopped in her tracks. "Oh?"

"His name is Juan Carlos. We've only gone out a few times, but we seemed to have made that instant connection, do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, yes I do."

She hesitated to see if Beatrix was joking, then continued. "He's a doctor who works with Biotech at CE. He's got a reputation for being quite opinionated, uncompromising to a fault – except with me. With me he's just a big softy."

She described his thick eyebrows and slicked-back black hair, his lean muscular physique, and she told Beatrix about everything they had in common, about their three dates together – including how they'd kissed in the empty office at CE until they were interrupted by guardbots.

Cara and Beatrix strolled arm-in-arm along the edge of a great gorge that overlooked a river. Southern Titan teemed with ridges and crevices and chasms all filled with flowing ethane and methane.

Cara noticed that Beatrix had stayed quiet for a long time after she'd spoken about Juan Carlos. Sometimes she forgot that

Bea was a Wergen, that like all Wergens she couldn't help but love her, and perhaps be jealous of her new relationship. Maybe it had been a mistake to confide in her, but Bea was her oldest and dearest friend.

She decided to change the subject. "How's Ambus?"

Beatrix stopped. She released Cara's arm and rubbed her shoulders nervously.

"What is it?" Cara said.

Beatrix turned away and started walking again.

"Tell me. What's wrong?"

Beatrix stood at the lip of a precipice. "You know how Ambus has always felt about humans."

She nodded. "Yes, he wants to avoid humans – so, of course, he lives in a colony of humans on Titan."

"That's not fair, Cara. He was brought here as a child. He had no say in the matter. And now that he's on the verge of reaching maturity... I'm afraid for him. He's found others who believe as he does, that co-exploration with human beings was a huge mistake."

"Really?" Cara had always found Ambus eccentric but basically harmless. "Well, it isn't as if Wergens would ever harm humans."

Beatrix looked away.

"Bea?"

"There's been a drug developed offworld recently, Cara. A suppressant that distorts the way that Wergens perceive human beings. It's horrible. It mutes our natural love for your people."

"And Ambus took it?"

"Its effects are only temporary – no longer than a few minutes. He views it as a way to 'free' his mind. You mustn't say anything, Cara. You have no idea of the consequences if anyone were to know. This is a serious crime."

"Does your father know about this?"

"My father left a few weeks ago to start work on a new project, the construction of another cityfield over Xanadu, on equatorial Titan," Beatrix said. "Maybe I'll go join him. Get away from all of this."

"That's really what you want?"

After a long pause, Beatrix said, "Now that you've met someone... I'm not sure there's anything left here for me."

"Bea, I don't want you to worry about Juan Carlos. That has nothing to do with our relationship. We've always been friends and we're going to stay friends forever. No man can change that."

Beatrix's face brightened and they continued their trek along the edge of the gorge, the ethane-filled tributaries churning far below them.

ENCRYPTED Med. Journal Entry No. 225 by Dr Juan Carlos Barbarón: Adsorption: The first step in macromeiosis is the penetration of the headtail fibers into the specific pseudo-protein receptors of the passive Wergen's tether. Enzymes quickly dissolve the base plate, the tethers become one, triggering significant changes to the aliens' body chemistry. (See Journal Entry No. 6.)

Cara lowered her head and trudged forward into the driving pink snow. Her boots sank into the slushy drifts as she

made it over the bend and Beatrix's hearth came into view. The dwelling resembled the upper half of a metallic egg with two arched openings on opposite sides. The Wergens had a very rigid conception of exits and entrances.

Juan Carlos, her fiancé, had wanted her to spend the day visiting with his parents, but she'd grown increasingly concerned over the fact that she hadn't heard a word from Beatrix in over a week. It wasn't like her. Usually the problem was keeping Beatrix from calling too often – something else Juan Carlos bitterly complained about. But Beatrix couldn't help herself, Cara had explained to him for what seemed like a thousand times. She was Wergen, after all. Juan Carlos didn't want to hear it.

Cara stepped through the archway, stomping the snow off of her boots. Her blue-tinted bodyfield clicked off automatically.

The welcoming bots skittered at her feet, unlaced her boots and laid out slippers for her on the scale-patterned floorboards.

This was the only time she could remember visiting the hearth that Beatrix hadn't been waiting for her at the entranceway. Could her friend be jealous? Is that why she'd stopped calling? When last they spoke, Cara had told her that Juan Carlos had finally proposed and that she had accepted. After expressing some confusion over how an engagement differed from dating or from marriage, Beatrix had asked whether it still meant that they would someday join a human-Wergen expedition and go colonize some strange new world together. Cara had reassured her that she and Juan Carlos had promising careers at CE and that they were both on track to join the colonization efforts.

Beatrix emerged out of the fireroom in the center of the dwelling and Cara staggered backward.

In all the years she'd known her, Cara had never seen Beatrix without some head covering. Usually she put on a *coronatis*, the leafy headdress that all Wergens wore. But today the flat top of her head was exposed and a rubbery cord extended out of her cranium, dragging along the floor to another room in the hearth.

"Cara!" Beatrix said, smiling. "I'm sorry that I haven't returned your messages. It's just...these past few weeks have been a very private time for me."

Cara pointed to the tether. "You...you're..."

"Yes, it was my time." She looked at the floor, embarrassed.

"Why didn't you tell me, Bea?"

She rubbed her shoulders nervously and didn't answer.

Cara understood that Wergens were notoriously private about their reproductive cycle, but this was her best friend. She felt wounded by the fact that Beatrix hadn't confided in her. Then she remembered what Beatrix had told her all those years ago about the absorption of one Wergen into another based on their genetic makeup, about encorporation.

"Bea, tell me you're genetically dominant. Please!"

Beatrix continued rubbing her shoulders.

A moment later the Wergen at the other end of the tether entered the room. He was shorter than Beatrix, with gray-flecked scales he covered with a dark blue robe.

Ambus.

Cara gasped. "But..."

"A pleasure to finally see you up close," he said.

But there was no pleasure in his voice, no Wergen servility.

Only an undercurrent of hostility.

Cara turned to Beatrix, eyes wide. "Your brother?"

"Of course. There are very few of us on Titan. And we're genetically compatible. We can safely interbreed for another generation."

"You don't owe her any explanations, Beatrix," Ambus said.

"I apologize for his tone, Cara," Beatrix said. "When he saw you approaching our hearth he took a dose of the suppressant. He'll be more himself in a few minutes."

"What does it feel like to hold so much sway over another person's life?" Ambus said to Cara. "Do you realize how unfair you've been to her? That she's your loyal slave because she has no choice?"

"She's not my slave!" Cara said.

"Your people and ours are at war. A secret war. We're all soldiers in that great battle and don't even know it."

"Bea," Cara said, "I just wanted to make sure you were all right. I really have to get back to Juan Carlos."

"What, you're leaving before we can bow down to you and wash your feet?" Ambus said.

Cara stepped into her shoes and walked back through the archway to the hearth, which reactivated her bodyfield.

"Cara, I'm sorry," Beatrix said. "Don't leave!"

"Look, I can't... I can't deal with all this. I can't believe you're with him." The sight of the tether repulsed her.

"Cara!" Beatrix shouted from behind her. But Cara marched ahead through the gusting snow without looking back.

ENCRYPTED Med. Journal Entry No. 226 by Dr Juan Carlos Barbarón: Tether contraction can commence as early as six months (Terran) after adsorption and accelerate, bringing the passive and dominant mates ever closer together. This triggers the growth of nerve fibers on the dominant Wergen's dermal scales in anticipation of the final stages of corpus meiosis, i.e. encorporation.

Cara floated through the thick liquid hydrocarbons with her eyes closed. It felt like she had left the present behind, like she had traveled back to when was ten years old, hunting perpuffers for the very first time. She broke the surface of the waters and threw her head back.

Beatrix sat on the shore, hugging her knees and watching her. She had said that it might still be possible to swim despite her tethered status, but that she preferred not to because Ambus didn't much enjoy the lake. He sat about twenty-five feet to her left, clutching their bunched-up tether and examining a bot. They could move almost fifty feet apart given their cord's length and elasticity. But Ambus couldn't be far away enough as far as Cara was concerned.

In all the years that she'd known Beatrix, her friend had never seemed more alien than she did at that moment with the flesh-colored cord dangling from her head, snaking across the shore toward Ambus. Poor Bea. How much time did she have left?

Cara descended again, peering through the natural muck of the methane. Something caught her attention. A circular shape pulsed by her feet. She reached down, pushed her hand through the ring and the creature instinctively contracted on her wrist.

Cara rose up out of the viscous methane and raised her fist in the air, flashing her find to Beatrix. A phosphorescent-purple perpufter.

Beatrix clapped her hands and shouted, "Well done, Cara! Well done!"

How many times did they dive together for perpufters, searching for the elusive purple one, the top prize? Cara couldn't imagine ever doing this without her best friend at her side.

She swam back to shore.

Ambus moved as far away as his tether would allow, sitting on the other side of a dune with his back to them.

"Cara, it's lovely," Beatrix said, fingering the perpufter.

Cara sighed happily. "After all of these years, I was beginning to think the purples ones were just a myth."

"Are you going to dive for more?"

"No, I have to go meet Juan Carlos for lunch."

"Don't go." Disappointment washed across Beatrix's face. "Cara, don't take this wrong way, but...I don't like what you've told me about him."

Cara raised an eyebrow. It was unlike Beatrix to make a negative statement about a human being – let alone to express her disagreement so openly. Normally, if her opinion differed from Cara's she would hesitate or turn her head away when responding. When something moved her, she would tilt her head to the left and nod. Cara had learned to read her subtle mannerisms.

"You don't know Juan Carlos," Cara said.

"Why doesn't he ever join us?"

"He's busy." Cara could never bring herself to tell Beatrix the truth. Despite Juan Carlos's many fine qualities – his drop-dead looks, his sharp wit and analytical mind, his love for her – he had a low threshold for socializing with Wergens. He made it a point to minimize the time he spent in their presence. "They're lapdogs, Cara," he had said to her that morning, trying to persuade her not to visit Beatrix. "Doesn't it offend you? That such intelligent beings can be so fatuous, so sycophantic... They're like lovesick schoolchildren."

Undeniable, really. But he had never met Beatrix, and their friendship transcended that species drive. Cara had to believe that. And certainly she had no biochemical reason for the fondness she felt for Beatrix. "If it's so offensive," she had answered, "maybe we shouldn't be accepting their technology, hmm?" She made a face and kissed him on the cheek. "I know you don't want me to go, but I really need to visit Bea at the lake." Juan Carlos's objections had dissuaded her from seeing Beatrix over the past few weeks. "I don't like the way I left things with her the last time we met. I'll see you at lunch, okay?"

Now, as she towed off, Cara spotted a shape that Beatrix had sculpted in the sand. Instead of a spaceship, it was the familiar oval outline of a Wergen hearth. "Are you going to talk to your father about joining one of the next few expeditions?" Cara said. "Juan Carlos and I were thinking of Langalana..."

"No, I don't think that's a good idea," Beatrix said.

"What do you mean?"

"CE doesn't need any more Wergens. The Explorata is already swamped with qualified volunteers. Ambus thinks that we might be better off staying here."

Cara didn't know how to respond. She stuffed her towel into

her carrytube and said, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Beatrix stared in Ambus's direction. "I found where Ambus kept the suppressant, Cara. And I threw it away. That's why he's keeping his distance. He knows that if he speaks to you, if he sees you up close, he'll feel the same way that I feel about you."

"Bea, once you're...encorporated..."

"You'll see, you and Ambus will be good friends, I know it."

Cara's eyes filled, and she nodded. "Yes, of course we will." But she said this only for Beatrix's sake. She knew that Ambus wanted to resist falling under humanity's spell and that she'd respect his wishes by keeping her distance. It wouldn't be fair to him if she didn't. Then again, how fair had she been to Beatrix all these years?

Beatrix's lips quivered and she reached out and clutched Cara's wrist. "Promise me we'll be friends forever."

"Bea..."

"Promise me?"

"Friends forever, Bea," Cara said. She hesitated. "Does it still feel...good to hold my hand?"

"More than you can know."

Maybe Cara had been fooling herself all these years. Maybe Beatrix's loyal unconditional love *was* just the product of a biochemical reaction. Maybe she'd been as unfair to Beatrix as Ambus claimed.

"I have to go," Cara said.

"Now?"

"I'm afraid so," she answered. "I don't want to have another fight with Juan Carlos." She took a few steps away from the Wergens, then turned and hurried back to Beatrix. Without saying a word, she slipped the purple perpufter onto her best friend's wrist.

ENCRYPTED Med. Journal Entry No. 227 by Dr Juan Carlos Barbarón: Incorporation. As the headtail continues its relentless contraction, dermal contact follows, and nerve fibers penetrate the pore receptors on the scales across the passive Wergen's body. This quickly disintegrates cell walls as the mates merge, commencing macromitosis. Genetic materials, primarily nucleic acids, flow from the dominant to the passive Wergen and impregnation of the rear sac results. Scales along the dorsal spine grow into multiple nubs – fetuses that develop outside the Wergen's body, attached to its back. (See Related Entry No. 195 on Multiple-Birth Wergen Broods and their Vulnerability to Dopamine Neurotransmitters as a Counteragent to Suppressor Drugs.)

Cara and Juan Carlos stepped through the hearth's archway as the bots skittered into the back rooms to alert Beatrix and Ambus of their arrival.

"Five minutes," Juan Carlos said. "Not one minute longer." He'd only permitted her to come on the condition that he accompany her to ensure she'd be out quickly. He said he feared that they'd encounter more Wergens than necessary since they tended to mob around humans.

"It's not safe for you to be walking around these Wergen neighborhoods. With the terrorist bombings at the Martian colony, how long will it be before they strike here on Titan?"

We may be forced to make some difficult decisions at Biotech, but we need to protect ourselves." He turned away and tapped his eyelids to open up a retinal connection to the newscasts. "Five minutes." He blinked and made a connection, his eyes glazing over.

Juan Carlos enjoyed being in control but she knew he had her best interests at heart. She thought about objecting – she had no doubt he was overreacting – but didn't want to provoke an argument. The media had blown out of proportion an incident involving a faction of so-called 'Wergen rebels' – an oxymoron if ever she'd heard one – that had caused some unrest on Mars and other sister colonies.

A minute later, Beatrix and Ambus entered the room. They now stood no more than six inches apart. Their tether had lost its elasticity and Beatrix's head drooped to one side. Her left leg had disappeared inside of Ambus's right leg so they walked awkwardly, like a three-legged monstrosity lurching forward. In a matter of months, Beatrix, her friend, would be gone forever, absorbed into Ambus's form and broken down into the chemical components that would leave him impregnated.

Beatrix's face had a semi-glazed look, a blank stare. But when she caught sight of Cara, a brightness washed over her face.

"Cara?" she said. But then the spark of recognition faded.

Cara stood to hug her, but couldn't do so without also putting her arms around Ambus.

"Thank you for visiting," Ambus said.

Juan Carlos blinked off his retinal connection. He had a strange expression Cara couldn't quite identify – disgust? fascination? – as he greeted them.

Beatrix and Ambus went to take a seat but couldn't do so because of their physical condition.

"It's kind of you to come," Ambus said. "I know how much Bea wanted to see you." From the way he smiled and bowed his head, he clearly had no suppressant in his system.

"Oh, Beatrix," Cara said. "Bea..."

"No, it's fine, it's fine," Ambus said. "How have you been? How are your parents?"

She told them about her mother's death, about her father joining the expedition to Langanalana. And as they conversed, Cara noticed that only Ambus spoke. She gazed directly into Beatrix's eyes and tried speaking only to her. "Do you remember the seasons we spent diving off the shore of Ontario Lacus? We practically covered ourselves head to toe with perpuffers."

A brief smile flashed across Beatrix's face. Then it went blank again.

"Yes, those are strong memories, Cara," Ambus said. "She'll remember them right up to the point of encorporation. After that, it's even possible I may still retain a stray experience, a random memory, but I can't guarantee any particular one will survive."

Cara placed her hands over Beatrix's. "Hey, Bea. Are you in there?"

"She's in there," Ambus answered. "Fully cognizant of everything you say."

"Can't she answer me?"

"I speak for her now."

Cara paused.

"So will there be nothing left of her?"

"Of course!" Ambus said. "Her knowledge of nanotech, her facility with plants, a few random experiences. Her most useful skills will survive encorporation, creating a new me."

"What about her dreams, Ambus?" Cara's voice trembled. "What about her dreams of exploring the universe?"

He paused. "I've come to like it here on Titan, Cara. I can't say..."

Juan Carlos shot her a look and glanced dramatically at his watch.

"Bea, honey," Cara said, patting her hand. "I have to go, I'm sorry. Juan Carlos needs to be somewhere right now and I promised I'd accompany him."

"That's fine," Ambus answered. "But Cara, you have to promise you'll come visit again soon. Beatrix would love to see you again before encorporation is complete."

Beatrix's eyes remained rolled back in her head and a bit of clear drool oozed out of the corner of her mouth. Cara couldn't bear to see her like this. But she would never abandon her friend in the final moments of her life.

"Of course I'll be back, Bea." She leaned in close and whispered in her ear. "We'll go to the lake again and you can sit on the shore and watch while I dive for perpuffers for us, okay?" She felt the tears well up and fought them back.

"Cara," Juan Carlos said softly. "We should get going."

She took a deep breath and waved goodbye to her friend, wondering how much of her would remain when next they met.

ENCRYPTED Med. Journal Entry No. 228 by Dr Juan Carlos Barbarón: Cutting the tether of mated Wergens results in an instantaneous loss of identity, followed by a rapid and painful death.

The smog that blanketed Titan was thinner than usual on this day. So much so that Cara could almost make out the outline of ringed Saturn filling half the sky. In all of her years of living on Titan this was the first time she'd ever seen the planet with her naked eye. Its proximity caused the tidal winds that drove down from the poles towards the equator.

She felt awkward visiting Beatrix's hearth. So much time had passed that her friend was certainly long gone by now. Damn Juan Carlos. She would never forgive herself for allowing him to keep her away all this time. She had made a promise and she would keep it. If nothing else, she owed it to Beatrix's memory.

As she followed the winding trail down a steep hill toward the familiar hearth, she slowed down. What if encorporation wasn't complete? What if pieces of Bea were still visible? She imagined the segments of an arm jutting out of Ambus's chest, two half-heads merged together into a disfigured monstrosity. She wouldn't be able to bear the sight of it.

No, more than a year had passed. She began walking again.

When she got within twenty feet of the hearth, four Wergen children raced out through the archway in her direction. They ran in circles around her, saying "Good morning" and "Can we help you?" over and over.

She stooped down. "Are you Beatrix's children?"

One of the thicker, squatter females said, "My name is Antilia. Ambus is our father."

"Is he inside?"

The children nodded excitedly and followed close behind her.

When she entered the hearth's archway, Ambus stood there as if expecting her, even after all this time.

"I knew you would come," Ambus said. There was no longer any sign of the Ambus she remembered, the Wergen who spurned all contact with humanity. He threw his arms around her and she hugged him back. He looked different. Thinner. And his scales had familiar flicks of silver.

He guided her into the fireroom, where a transparent tube that ran from floor to ceiling blazed with flames. "Your children are beautiful, Ambus," she said.

The Wergen children tittered and whispered to each other.

"I need to speak alone with Cara for a moment," he said to them and they slowly, reluctantly left the fireroom staring over their shoulders at her, trying to sneak one final glance.

Housebots skittered at Cara's feet, taking away her boots while others brought in a tray with a cup of steaming spicy sap.

"How is Juan Carlos?" he asked as they took their seats in front of the roaring fire column at the center of the room.

"I broke off our engagement."

Ambus gasped.

"He was so possessive. So secretive about his work at Bio-tech. I thought I could change him. But it didn't happen." She set down her cup of cider-sap. "He didn't like it when I visited

with friends, when I did anything without him. And I went along with what he wanted. I started to feel...suffocated. I couldn't continue living that way, under someone else's thumb. I didn't like the person I was becoming."

Ambus stared incredulously. After a long pause, he said, "Sometimes I forget how truly alien you are."

She smiled. "No, of course you wouldn't understand."

They drank their sap and all the while Ambus leaned forward on his elbows and fixated on her every word; he offered her food; he asked whether she wanted him to feed the flames so she could luxuriate in the warmth of the fire column.

"Are you sure I can't get you something else?" Ambus said.

The initial joy Cara felt at being back in Beatrix's hearth began to drain away as she listened to Ambus's steady stream of fatuous remarks. She had to face the bittersweet truth: her best friend was gone forever. It could never be the same with just any other Wergen. She couldn't imagine herself without Beatrix. Before she even realized it, she started to cry.

"Cara, what is it?"

"I was thinking about something you told me once. That it was unfair of me to have remained friends with Beatrix for so many years." She wiped away the tears and regained her composure. "I think you may have been right. I should have...freed her of her biochemical shackles."

"Again, I wasn't myself at the time. I had taken the suppressant, which skewed my perception of reality. Please forget

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about what I said to you. It was unkind of me."

"Unkind, but true."

"Cara...did Beatrix explain what happened to my suppressants?"

Cara recalled their conversation on the lakeshore, when Beatrix had explained how she'd found where Ambus hid the drugs and destroyed them. "Yes, she kept them from you."

"On the day that we met you at the shore..." Ambus paused as if considering the consequences of his words. "Beatrix had taken the suppressants herself."

"What?"

"She said she wanted to have...a better understanding of her relationship with you, Cara. Its effects were temporary – only a matter of minutes – but in those minutes she experienced a clear understanding of her true feelings."

Cara dreaded asking, but she did. "And how did she really feel about me in that moment of clarity?"

"She never told me. And the memory didn't survive encorporation. I'm sorry, I don't know."

After an extended, awkward silence, they talked about other subjects: politics, the terrorist attacks on the Martian settlement, the rumored abandonment of the Langalanan outpost, the future of human-Wergen colonization efforts. And so on. And when it came time for her to leave, Cara knew that she would never return here again.

As she stood and the bots re-laced her boots, Ambus said,

"Before you go, there's something I need to give you." A few seconds later a bot entered the room carrying a small metal box. "Beatrix wanted you to have this."

"It's a stasis box," Cara said. She carefully lifted the lid and looked inside.

A purple perpuffer sat at its center.

"Beatrix preserved it for so many months," Ambus said. "I don't understand its significance."

Cara slipped it onto her wrist. Removing it from the stasis box meant that the perpuffer wouldn't last for more than a day or two before decaying. But it didn't matter.

"Thank you, Ambus," she said softly.

Ambus tilted his head to the left in a familiar manner, and nodded.

As Cara made her way out the exit archway, she told herself she'd never see this hearth again. But after only a few seconds she couldn't resist looking back over her shoulder. She saw Ambus out in front, surrounded by the four Wergen children, all of them staring raptly at her as she trudged through the methane snowdrifts.

Mercurio was recently nominated for the 2011 World Fantasy Award in the short fiction category for his *Black Static* story 'Tu Sufrimiento Shall Protect Us', which is now available for download from our website (ttopress.com/blackstatic/freestories/). He dedicates 'Tethered' to the memory of writer and reviewer Colin Harvey, who left us much too soon.

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BOOK ZONE

OSAMA

Lavie Tidhar

review and interview by
Maureen Kincaid Speller

DANGEROUS WATERS

Juliet E. McKenna

review by Jim Steel

THE URBAN FANTASY ANTHOLOGY

eds Peter S. Beagle &

Joe R. Lansdale

review by Lawrence Osborn

ROBOPOCALYPSE

Daniel H. Wilson

review by Ian Sales

THE BOOK OF TRANSFORMATIONS

Mark Charan Newton

review by Sandy Auden

QUEEN OF KINGS

Maria Dahvana Headley

review by Jack Deighton

THE TESTAMENT OF JESSIE LAMB

Jane Rogers

review by Andy Hedgecock

NEVER NEVER STORIES

Jason Sanford

review by Jim Steel

FUTURE MEDIA

ed Rick Wilber

review by Duncan Lunan

OSAMA

Lavie Tidhar

PS Publishing, 276pp, £19.99 hb

After the 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, literary commentators speculated about the form of the first 9/11 novel. Speculation turned to disappointment when the novels did begin to emerge. Perhaps they had anticipated panoramic novels that witnessed the heroism and tragedy of those terrible hours, promoting the grand narrative of national survival, validating America's moral victory through military action. However, the consequences of 9/11, and the other terrorist attacks of the last few years, in London, Europe, across the Middle East, Africa, are less easily marked as they ripple out through the lives of everyone involved, uncommented on but always present.

How does a writer address this? For that matter, how does a writer address the existence of someone like Osama Bin Laden, a figure so abstract one suspects he exists only to act as a scapegoat for society?

How else but as a fictional character in a pulp fiction. Which brings us to Lavie Tidhar's remarkable new novel, *Osama*. At first glance it seems to be a provocatively-titled private eye novel, focusing on Joe, who has been asked by a beautiful young woman to find Mike Longshott, the undoubtedly pseudonymous author of the very popular *Osama Bin Laden – Vigilante* series which everyone seems to be reading. As is the way of detective novels, a new case brings danger and Joe finds himself targeted by mysterious assassins. His only clue to the whereabouts of Mike Longshott is that his publisher is based in Paris. Joe sets out on an odyssey to find Longshott, a journey which will take him to Paris, London and New York.

While the story may start as a genre detective novel nothing is quite what it seems. Our expectations are constantly challenged in tiny ways. For example, unconventionally, Joe works as a private investigator in Laos rather than LA. His new client has given Joe no reason why he must find Longshott but the task

Lavie Tidhar: A Storm in the Global Village

When I began my conversation with Lavie Tidhar, he had just seen a review of *Osama* in which the reader had complained at being made to fill in the gaps in the novel for himself. Lavie had wondered out loud if *Osama* was actually a genre novel, so I asked him to expand on that.

It depends on how you read it. I certainly think it borrows, or plays with, several genres – noir fiction, alternative history, the ghost story, science fiction, non-fiction reportage, the literary novel – but how you interpret the book remains to some extent open, so that I can't turn and point and say with any specificity "this is what it means".

I think it might require genre-sensibilities to read – in that the book is like a puzzle that needs 'solving', in the same way Joe needs to solve both the overt mystery – where is Mike Longshott, this obscure pulp writer – and the covert mystery, of his own identity. I'm not sure genre readers do this sort of thing any more very much – I think science fiction and fantasy have become much more a form of entertainment that doesn't require a close reading. The review you and I were

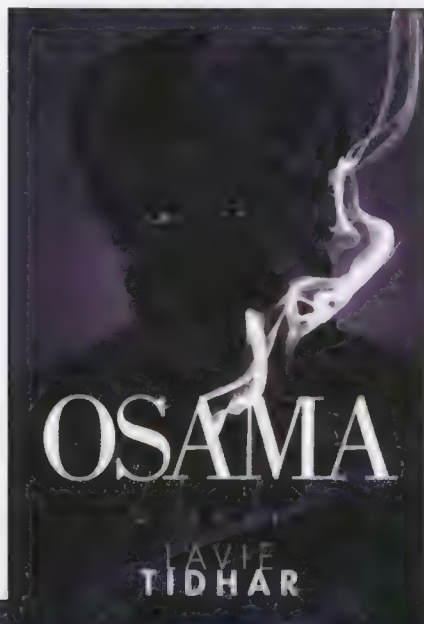
talking about is a case in point. That's pretty symptomatic – and was part of the reaction from publishers to this book. *Osama* has been through a lot of publishers – some editors loved it but their marketing department didn't know what to do with it, others loved it but didn't want to get bomb threats in the mail. And some had the same reaction as that reviewer, that being "required to think" is not a commercial proposition.

There's a genre tension in *Osama*. You could read it as a more-or-less straight alternative history, you could read it as a ghost story, or you could read it in a non-fantastical interpretation, which is possibly my own preference.

There is a difference between "fierce reading" and reading which involves consumption rather than engagement. I wondered if it was because people are now more familiar with genre through film.

There is a lot of dialogue with film in the novel, particularly *Casablanca*, but any number of other overt and cover references. *Casablanca* fascinates me as it

seems to be peculiarly meant for him. The presence of the Osama Bin Laden books is sufficient indication that *Osama* is set in an alternative universe but it's not so much detail as mood that alerts the reader. If this novel were a film, it would be in black and



white, reflecting Joe's own sense of the past gathering around him.

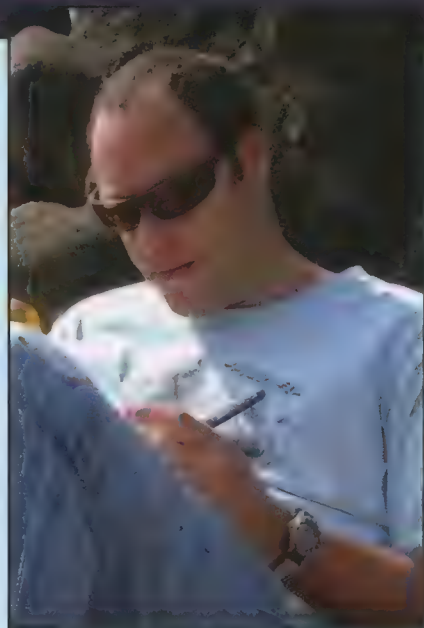
If life is simple on a day-to-day level, reality is still constantly reshaping itself in ways that don't always quite make sense to Joe or to the reader. Characters waver in and out of view, literally. Events lack even a fictional logic. Something is always indefinably 'off'. It is therefore possible to read this novel as a narrative about the nature of literature, about the way genres speak to another, how borders are never quite as stable as people like to imagine they are. I interpreted the novel that way the first time I read it, seeing Tidhar happily confounding the reader's expectations.

But this novel is as elusive as it is allusive (and it is filled with references to pulps, children's books, film); a second reading brings a different, richer and much darker understanding of what's going on, with clues to the nature of the mysterious 'refugees' who are constantly referred to, who seem to press around Joe as he continues his journey. The journey itself

now seems strangely drawn out, with no proper end in sight.

Given the genre conventions in play, you may already be anticipating the denouement of this novel; you will be correct, but you will also be wrong. While Tidhar has transformed terrorist attacks into narrative intrusions into Joe's world in order to write about them without glorifying them, the deeper question that needs to be grappled with is just what kind of world is Joe living in? Or rather, given that *Osama* is clearly a metafiction, who is constructing Joe's world and from what? This is a question each reader answers for his or herself, in part because we also re-construct Joe's world, based on what we know. This prompts us to think about how we tell ourselves stories to make sense of the world; that is what lies at the heart of this novel. Layers of fiction mount up as Tidhar works his way deep into the emotional debris of Joe's life. As a result, *Osama* is incredibly complex and intensely moving. It is already on my best of the year list.

Review and Interview by Maureen Kincaid Speller



is a film made almost entirely by genuine refugees; even the Nazis are played by German-Jewish refugees from the Holocaust. I was also fascinated by the idea of doors in film, how opening a door in an outside shot can lead to an inside hundreds of miles away. Joe's journey in *Osama* is a lot about locked doors, and opening those

"The real world is not like realist fiction. It's weird and it makes very little sense. Reality has odd coincidences that would never work in fiction. Reality has magic in it because people believe in magic. Or gods. The difference between tap water and holy water is belief, and belief is a form of story"

doors, and the cost of doing so.

Writing the 'Ghost Stories' section was hard. That was the hardest part, I think. That's when Joe finally opens a door he had been trying hard to not even see it's there. Writing a book like this...you're dealing with people's loss, people's very traumatic experience, and you walk a very fine line. I was relieved when I finished that section.

I'm aware that you have a deep knowledge of genres and how they work, and of pulps in particular.

I love pulp – the lurid covers, the often lurid prose, the sensationalist nature of it. I collect Hebrew pulp paperbacks. 'Mike Longshot' was a pseudonym on several Hebrew pulp novels, one of several references in the book you wouldn't necessarily be expected to pick up. So the novel engages with the pulp 'mode', while

interrogating it, because so much of our media conception of the 'war on terror' can be read in those self same terms, as a pulp narrative, like a cheap American paperback. When life begins to resemble a pulp paperback, what does it make our books?

Ironically, of course, *Osama* doesn't have a paperback edition!

You wrote *Osama* while you were in Israel, you've travelled a lot generally over the years, you are involved in running the World SF blog – all this points to a very broad view of the world. Do you think that gives you greater flexibility to write about *Osama*? And why *Osama*, to begin with?

The origin of *Osama* is in 'My Travels with Al-Qaeda', published in the Ellen Datlow and Terry Windling anthology *Salon*.

Fantastique (2006). The two people caught in an endless time-loop in that story, forced to repeat the attacks experienced in London and Dar-es-Salaam and the Sinai, are the two people in *Osama*, are me and my wife.

'Wrong Number', published in *World Literature Today* last year, has a man wake up in the morning to discover he is Osama Bin Laden. And the new, final, story, 'The Last of the Osamas', is written by Mike Longshott, the pulp writer, as well as by myself – it is an uneasy collaboration that mixes both pulp and recollection.

I actually wrote *Osama* in Laos. Paradoxically, it is the last place to have a connection to the war the novel's about while, at the same time, it is the scene of another Secret War, another American War (as the Vietnamese across the border call it), which one can draw certain parallels with. And of course this is where Joe chooses to hide himself, this quiet sunny place where nothing seems to happen...

What got me about this 'war on terror' is how little understanding of it there was in the West. That sense of *bewilderment*. Osama is a disembodied figure, a villain-wraith whose acts are incomprehensible, like a figure out of nightmare. Whereas from the other perspective – the other side of the war – there is this unbearable *anger* – at America, at the West, at this military and cultural and economic occupation, this driving colonial force that kills indiscriminately, invades, imposes a cultural and political agenda like something out of the 19th century. And this spoke to me, on a deep level, that concept of a war where neither side comprehends the other.

Joe is that embodiment of bewilderment. He doesn't know what's going on. And he doesn't really want to find out, either. Everyone tells him what's going on. He just doesn't want to listen. The clues are all there, people talk in seeming riddles but for them, they couldn't be more plain.

Osama rose out of real-life encounters. Everyone remembers 9/11, but I was there in Nairobi in the same hotel as the bombers who blew up the American embassy. I was in Dar-es-Salaam when the attacks happened and I was in Nairobi a week later and saw the ruins of the embassy building. My wife was at the attack in Ras-al-Shaitan, in the Sinai – so little of this war directly involved America and it was only when an attack happened on the American mainland that people sat up and paid attention. But the dead are the dead

all over. You mention the Sinai attacks and who knows what you're talking about? But there were three, and they killed people.

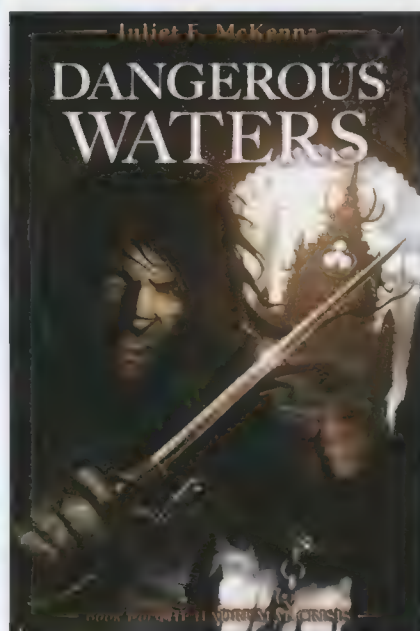
A lot of *Osama* is about those *other* attacks. The ones you don't pay much attention to because they're nowhere important – Egypt or Algiers, say. And at the same time they're about the counter-attacks – the thousands upon thousands dead in Iraq and Afghanistan. So many ghosts – is it any wonder Joe's world in *Osama* is so full of them? Where do they go? The book is not about Osama Bin Laden. It is about his shadow. Or not even his shadow, but the shadow of a shadow called Osama.

Do you think that genre acts as a distancing mechanism in all this?

To an extent, yes. Alienation is a powerful tool. And to me, the people who reacted to 9/11 or 7/7 but wouldn't know anything about the three Sinai attacks, or Algiers, and who don't understand why this has happened, why anyone would do this to us, we're the good guys. That's how we think about the world. Remember 'Axis of Evil'? We think in terms of good guys and bad guys. Jedi and the Dark Side of the Force. We think in pulp terms. So how else do you engage with reality? You know, 'Realist fiction', it's as much a construct. As much a trope, a way of story-telling. The real world is not like realist fiction. It's weird and it makes very little sense. Reality has odd coincidences that would never work in fiction. Reality has magic in it because people *believe* in magic. Or gods. The difference between tap water and holy water is belief, and belief is a form of story. And we tell each other stories all the time. Bush's story about the war was very simple. We're the Good Guys, and our Way of Life is being threatened by savage Fundamentalist Muslims and we have to go and Kick Their Butts. Bush thought in terms of a Hollywood movie, but he was the president of the United States. His movie was other people's deaths. And Osama Bin Laden's story was the same.

So you tell me, how else could you write about it? The question is not who's going to win, but which *story* is going to win? And death is the end of story. Only not in *Osama*, perhaps, because *Osama* is story. About stories. Stories that are real life. So you have to go meta. Life is meta!

And on that thought, Lavie Tidhar, thank you very much for this interview. Visit Lavie online: lavietidhar.wordpress.com.



DANGEROUS WATERS

Juliet E. McKenna

Solaris, 591pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

Like all successful secondary worlds, Juliet E. McKenna's land resembles an iceberg. The vast majority of the world-building is out of sight of the reader but its mass can be intuited by the unstoppable force of its reality. The characters, though they might think otherwise, are temporal beings who can rarely grasp the magnitude of their own world. *Dangerous Waters* is the first book in McKenna's fourth series and provides an ideal starting place for anyone who is new to her. It takes a slightly smaller cast than the *Chronicles of the Lescari Revolution* (her third series; a Marxist take on epic fantasy if ever there was one) and pushes one or two of its peripheral characters to centre stage.

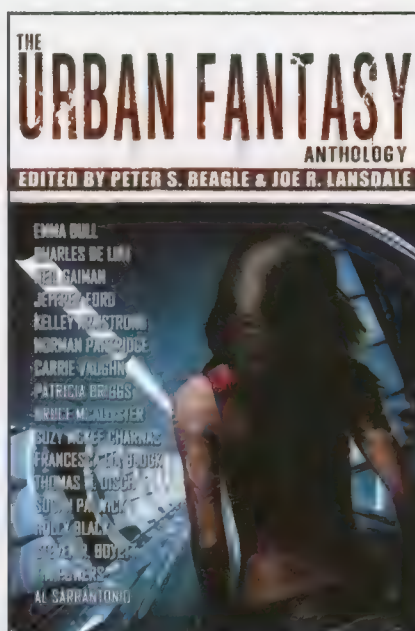
This time the focus is on Caladhria which is facing harsher than usual seasonal raids from the Archipeligan Corsairs. Lord Halferan, as mentioned in the previous series, had hired Minelas, a rogue wizard from Hadrimal, to protect the coast, only to be betrayed and killed by the wizard who then set himself up in Halferan's Estates with a false name and false papers. The patriarchal nature of the society means that his widow, Lady Zurenne, has no choice other than to endure it. Zurenne is a proud and honourable, but not particularly likable, woman, and she provides one of the three main viewpoints in the novel.

One of her captains, Corrian, captured when Halferan died and forced to serve as a galley slave, is another. He escapes and heads north with a vague plan to recruit another wizard to defend Caladria. Whatever he was at the beginning, the galleys have given him a driving thirst for revenge. One of the others aptly describes him as a 'vagabond swordsman' but, like all of McKenna's characters, he's a complex mix of motivations. There's a touch of xenophobia about him, for example, that may merely be ignorance but could be the seed of something darker. Then there's Jisbeth, a mage from Harumbriel who is again familiar from the previous series, and who has to intervene here to counter the damage wrecked by Minilas. It may initially seem counter-intuitive to say that she is the most recognisably modern of the three, but Hadrumal, although not perfect, is the nearest thing to a free and prosperous society. McKenna's magic is also very carefully crafted and merges at its edges with our sciences.

The forces of history, too, are apt to sweep people before them and no one has a monopoly on honour. At one stage the Archmage, playing devil's advocate, says to the Caladhran aristocrats that the Corsairs do not execute a man for stealing from a wealthier man.

The plot thickens wonderfully. Corrain succeeds in his unlikely quest, in probably the only manner possible, while the Hadrumal mages find that they have to intervene in Calhadhras as a matter of damage control. This volume comes to a satisfactory conclusion and sets up the following books for a three-way battle of monumental proportions. There is also an impending twist that is obvious to the reader but has left most of the characters oblivious.

'The Coming of the Wizard' is a short story which is a prequel to *Dangerous Waters*. First published in the *Solaris Book of Fantasy*, it can now be found on the Solaris site. It deals with the betrayal of Halferan by Minelas which is replayed from a totally different perspective in the opening chapter, and I highly recommend that you read it. You'll find a dark examination of human nature that doesn't play with genre conventions because it sits at the very heart of them. Anyone who is a fan of high fantasy should already be following McKenna. Anyone who is not a fan of high fantasy has probably just been reading the wrong books. *Dangerous Waters* is the right stuff.



THE URBAN FANTASY ANTHOLOGY

eds Peter S. Beagle & Joe R. Lansdale
Tachyon Publications, 432pp, \$15.95 tpb

Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

It's raw, it's vibrant, it's undeniably popular, but just what is urban fantasy? The editors of this new anthology from Tachyon attempt to define the genre by offering us twenty short stories they regard as typical. These stories have been subdivided into three categories: mythic fiction, paranormal romance and noir fantasy. By way of introduction, Peter Beagle offers a useful critical overview of the book as a whole, while Charles De Lint, Paula Guran and Joe Lansdale do the same for each of the three subdivisions.

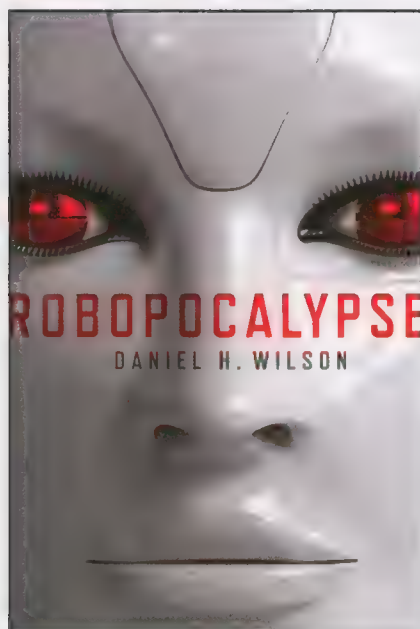
Mythic fiction is the oldest and best established of the three types of urban fantasy. However, as Charles De Lint points out, the term was originally chosen by him and Terri Windling precisely to avoid describing what they were writing as 'urban fantasy'. It is probably the most easily definable of the three categories. Essentially, mythic fiction refers to any story that takes traditional fantasy tropes and/or mythic elements and places them in a (sometimes loosely) contemporary setting. In this collection, the category is illustrated by stories from Emma Bull, Charles de Lint, Neil Gaiman, Jeffrey Ford and Peter Beagle. All the stories chosen to represent mythic fiction are excellent reads, but the Jeffrey Ford offering ('On the Road

to New Egypt') seems rather out of place in this company: there is a surrealism about it that to my mind makes it more akin to the category described here as 'noir fantasy'.

The term 'paranormal romance' immediately put me in mind of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the *Twilight* saga and Laurell Hamilton's *Anita Blake* novels. Paula Guran's take on the category certainly overlaps with those works, but she puts more emphasis on 'kickassitude' and detective-style plots than on any element of romance. The stories chosen to represent this category are by Charles de Lint (again), Kelley Armstrong, Norman Partridge, Carrie Vaughn, Patricia Briggs, Bruce McAllister, Suzy McKee Charnas and Francesca Lia Block. Again it is a strong selection of stories. My particular favourite was Patricia Briggs' 'Seeing Eye', perhaps because I have a soft spot for paranormal detective stories.

Finally, Joe Lansdale introduces what in their wisdom the editors have decided to call noir fantasy. I think this is a misnomer because, to my mind, it suggests a connection with film noir and hardboiled crime fiction; it leads me to expect a cynical take on the world, a morally ambiguous (possibly darkly humorous) central character and possibly an erotic dimension that is not constrained by (or at least is in tension with) conventional attitudes. In fact, the term 'noir fantasy' leads me to expect precisely what Paula Guran highlighted about 'paranormal romance'. However, for Joe Lansdale it clearly means (urban) fantasy with a strong component of horror and/or surrealism. The stories presented here as 'noir fantasy' are a disparate collection by Thomas Disch, Susan Palwick, Holly Black, Steven Boyett, Joe Lansdale, Tim Powers and Al Sarrantonio. They are all twisted, dark and surreal...but noir? Of these, I found Susan Palwick's 'Gestella' (a werewolf betrayed by her human lover) and Steven Boyett's 'Talking Back to the Moon' (ex-werewolf and centaur on a road journey in a post-apocalyptic California) particularly memorable.

The sheer diversity of stories anthologised here does a good job of highlighting the breadth of contemporary urban fantasy. I am less convinced by the editors' attempts to classify the stories. But more important is the fact that they have brought together an excellent collection of stories that showcases the best of urban fantasy writing (however you define it). Definitely a must read!

**ROBOPOCALYPSE****Daniel H. Wilson**

Doubleday, 347pp, \$25.00 hb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Daniel H. Wilson has a PhD in Robotics. He is also the author of *How to Survive a Robot Uprising*, among other books. He's the go-to guy when American television needs an expert on robots. Almost every book he has written has been optioned – including this one, *Robopocalypse*, his first novel for adults. In fact, the film rights were sold before the book was even published.

This is a well-worn narrative, and it's the story of the book rather than the story in the book which often generates more interest. When six-figure sums are bandied about for a genre novel, its quality is beside the point. Such books cannot depend on genre readers to recoup their outlay. They have to break out – and an author with celebrity status is needed to provide the slingshot required. *Robopocalypse* will be a successful book, but not from any quality intrinsic to it as a novel qua novel.

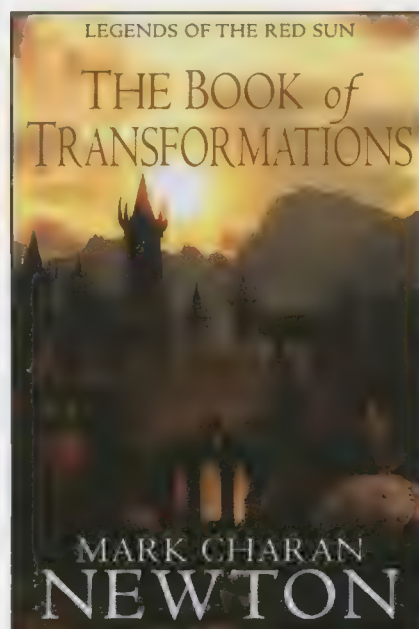
So it should come as little surprise that, as a novel qua novel, *Robopocalypse* is not a satisfactory read. Sometime in the near-future, a scientist accidentally unleashes an Artificial Intelligence. Over a period of a couple of years, this AI, Archos, reprograms all the world's robots to turn on human beings, and so a war begins. *Robopocalypse* opens with a human combat team finding a device, built by the robots, which appears to contain

eyewitness accounts to various incidents which took place during the Robot War. These incidents become the chapters of *Robopocalypse*, and each one is introduced with a blurb from the device's discoverer.

This novel, then, is not a narrative but a collection of vignettes which, together, create a story-arc of sorts. Some of these vignettes are more successful than others. When the story is set in the US, Wilson handles his voices well, though there is a tendency to lionise his protagonists. However, one series of chapters is set in London, and it appears Wilson learnt his British accent from watching Guy Ritchie films. Another features a mild-mannered technician in Tokyo who later proves to be a genius. These are not ordinary people, though the structure of *Robopocalypse* would have you believe they are representative of the human race.

Given the author's credentials, the one area in which you'd expect *Robopocalypse* to shine would be its science and technology. But even though these elements were so clearly written with an eye toward cinematic visuals they often appear implausible. Automated cars in New York, for instance, go on a killing spree. But this makes little or no sense – the computing power necessary to turn a car into a weapon which can target moving pedestrians simply wouldn't be built in. Wilson also has a tendency to project emotions onto the robots, as if anthropomorphisation would make them a more implacable enemy. Being a roboticist, he should know better.

Robopocalypse is a novel powered by two things, both external to the text. It reads as though it has been written to facilitate its transformation to another medium, the cinema. Hence the soundbites and pithy blurbs which open each chapter. Likewise the framing narrative, which implies a level of rigour the novel too often exceeds: the claimed sources for each chapter – CCTV footage, recorded interview, etc – do not possess the level of detail or insight the writing displays. However, it is not all bad. Some parts of *Robopocalypse* are quite effective, and Wilson does a good job of describing the collapse of US society and the destruction of the nation's infrastructure. Having said that, there's little point, to be honest, in reading the book. Spielberg is already working on the film adaptation. You might as well wait for that: the visuals are likely to remain unchanged, but at least the story-arc will have been distilled down into something much more potent and satisfying.

**THE BOOK OF TRANSFORMATIONS****Mark Charan Newton**

Tor, 418pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Sandy Auden

Mark Charan Newton likes to set himself a challenge. With each new volume of the *Legends of the Red Sun* series he's been pushing his writing skills further to avoid becoming complacent or formulaic. In volume one, *Nights of Villjamur*, he created a story where the city itself was a character; when *City of Ruin* arrived it contained even more imaginative cultural creations influenced by some cyberpunk undertones. With this latest volume, he's centred the story on a transsexual character, Lan, who starts the book as a man but is transformed into a woman very early on.

There are many different types of change affecting all sorts of people in this story. Lan's transformation is just the first and is made possible by a Cultist group who use ancient artefacts to practice their magic. Afterwards, Lan tries to quietly take up her new life as a woman but her compatibility with Cultist magic and a desperate need to hide her masculine origins – a condition considered unnatural and disgusting in Villjamur – leaves her open to manipulation by the city's Emperor. Using blackmail, the Emperor's Cultists transform Lan and two other unfortunates, Tane and Vuldon, into the Villjamur Knights: powerfully enhanced humans to be the city's symbol of hope as they are sent out to fight crime, uncover plots by the local anarchists and

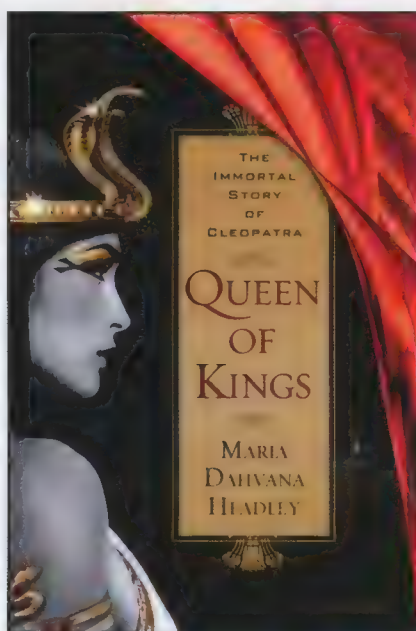
attend formal ceremonies. But the city is also moving towards a transformation. The anarchists are becoming more organised and successful under the leadership of renegade Cultist Shalev. A fleeing priest is releasing entities best left buried, and the danger from a distant invasion is drawing closer. As the Emperor's peripheral cities fall to the oncoming armies, the enemy's strange ambassador, Dartun, navigates across frozen lands, heading for the gates of Villjamur.

While Dartun's plot line delivers the most surprising punch line, it's Newton's sensitive handling of Lan's point of view that stands out the most. The author said on his blog, "If I can make readers empathise and feel for her, when they may otherwise have found her character a point of humour or hatred, I will consider it a decent job done." And he definitely made Lan a sympathetic character – although I realise that as a straight female reading a straight guy's interpretation of a transsexual character, I'm not the most highly qualified person to comment. That taken into account, however, I still feel that Lan's character is treated fairly by the author, if not by some of the other characters.

It's no surprise that Newton did a good job with Lan, since this entire series is liberally populated with excellent characterisation. Newton understands how to build each character into an individual and creates a robust cast around Lan to help illustrate her issues and move the plot along. And he has a lot of plot to keep moving as he draws together a series of disparate story threads into a single explosive climax.

It's an ending that will certainly cause issues for the characters, but may also cause problems for the author because Newton has set himself another goal for this series: to make all the stories stand alone. So far, he's achieved his goal with three independent, reasonably self-contained stories. However, it'll be interesting to find out how successfully he handles that approach in book four. Given the cliff-hanger nature at the close of this volume, it's hard to see where he can go that won't require a solid understanding of the events covered here.

This isn't the only reason to look forward to the next volume either. The whole series is reliably entertaining and crammed with unusual creations. There may be times when the dialogue is a little lumpy or the pace flags but these aspects soon fade because it's the haunting ice-bound landscapes, engaging characters and vivid cultures that leave the lasting impression.



QUEEN OF KINGS Maria Dahvana Headley

Bantam Press, 416pp, \$25.95 hb

Reviewed by Jack Deighton

US author Maria Dahvana Headley's first novel is a historical fantasy set in the founding days of the Roman Empire. Not only Mark Antony and Cleopatra but Octavian/Augustus and Marcus Agrippa feature prominently. Even the poet Virgil pops up in one scene. The novel swiftly deviates from the accepted history as it has Cleopatra, in an attempt to frustrate her final defeat along with Antony, use a fragmentary spell to unleash the ancient Egyptian deity Sekhmet from her long incarceration by the sun god Ra. The partial spell, however, provides no protection for its invoker and Sekhmet enters Cleopatra's body, allowing her to shift shape – serpent, lion and sea snake the creatures of choice. But Sekhmet's influence also turns her into a killer and drinker of blood.

In the subsequent mayhem, Antony is revived from the dead not once but twice, albeit the second time as a shade, and the action moves on to Rome where Cleopatra seeks revenge on Augustus who employs sorcerers of his own to combat her – a Norse weaver of life threads, a Psylli who has an affinity with snakes and Chrysate, a devotee of Hecate – all of whom have their own agendas.

In a series of false climaxes Cleopatra almost kills Augustus, is subsequently

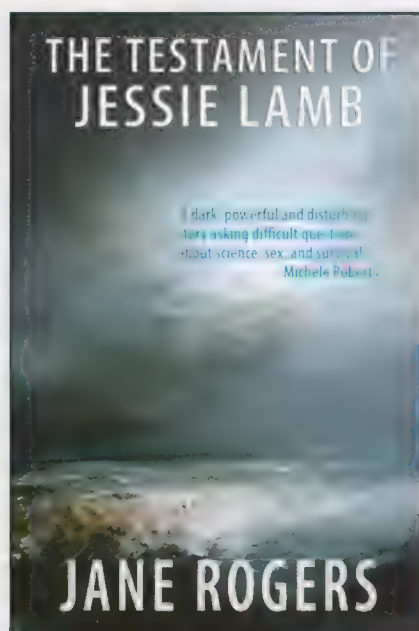
trapped and then set free to roam through the underworld with Antony while Sekhmet looses the first of her arrows of pestilence upon the world. After the lovers return to the living world more mythological mining involving the labours of Hercules sets up the true climax.

This is all entertaining enough if you don't like rigour but throughout we are given little to flesh out the characters who as a result never convince, being for the most part no more than plot enablers.

In addition, no real flavour of life in ancient Alexandria or Rome is presented. Since Headley's story concerns aristocrats, that may be fair enough, but it fails to ground the story and the fantastical elements end up becoming one damn thing after another.

The prose is a curious mixture of archaisms and modern usages and, irritatingly, the point of view within a scene sometimes changes, often more than once. There are, too, frequent instances of not quite appropriate word choices. Suspension of disbelief is also made more difficult by the fact the narrative keeps hitting a succession of wrong notes. The prologue suggests we will read the personal memoir of Nicolaus of Damascus, tutor to Cleopatra's children, though the main text and the epilogue are both actually narrated in standard third person. There are anachronisms: in a piece of dialogue, despite Augustus barely having invented the post, the position of Emperor is held in too great a reverence; "bleachers" for open air seating is surely too modern; and at one point someone wields a bayonet. (Roman technology was advanced in all sorts of ways but even they did not have access to rifles, nor muskets even.) After Cleopatra has been transfigured her skin blisters in the sun but Headley seems to forget this for most of the novel till apparently suddenly remembering it again in the aftermath of the climactic battle. Finally, the pet endearment used – endlessly – between Antony and Cleopatra, and stated to mean, "You are mine", is rendered as, "Vos es mei". Vos is the plural of you (the singular is tu, but either is redundant in Latin.) Headley's formulation – "both of you are mine" – thus makes no sense. It might have in the one scene where two Antonys appear, were es not actually a singular verb form.

When belief is being stretched so much by the subject matter small details like these loom larger and annoy more than they might otherwise. If you can ignore them, do so. If not, you'll struggle.



THE TESTAMENT OF JESSIE LAMB

Jane Rogers

Sandstone Press, 240pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock

In Jane Rogers' eighth novel a near future dystopia is created through an act of biological terrorism. Her portrayal of a society in crisis, in which social cohesion is collapsing, established values are corroding and personal freedoms are under threat, has already drawn comparisons with Attwood's *The Handmaids Tale*, P.D. James' *The Children of Men* and Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.

In essence the book tells the story of 16 year old Jessie Lamb, who is being held against her will in a suburban house. The narrative switches between terse diary entries detailing her experiences as a captive, and more freeform reflections exploring her life and concerns. As the story unfolds, these two strands of testimony reveal the identity of her captor, the reasons for her captivity and the full nature of the catastrophe afflicting her world.

One of Jessie's most memorable musings concerns what she believes to be the saddest song ever written: 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' by Joy Division. It's so apt to Jessie's story, on so many levels, that it could have provided an alternate title.

In part, this is a coming of age novel, wittily observed but heartbreaking, enchantingly garrulous but deeply unsettling. It deals with notions of identity and belonging with the conviction, passion

and flair of Iain Banks' *The Crow Road*, David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* and J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Jessie could rival Holden Caulfield as a caustic observer of the inauthentic and insincere. But sadly for her, and everyone else in her world, there's more to this story than teenage angst and alienation.

Rogers uncovers the consequences of the biological apocalypse with a series of pull backs and reveals that would be the envy of a consummate crime novelist. A new virus, known as MDS or Maternal Death Syndrome, has been created and unleashed by an unidentified terrorist group. MDS, we learn, is universal in terms of its transmission: the whole of humanity carries it. It is, however, highly selective in terms of its morbidity and mortality patterns, in that it attacks the central nervous systems of pregnant women. The disease is rather like a fast-forward variant of CJD: its victims rapidly exhibit signs of dementia, personality change and cognitive deterioration. And they die soon afterwards. Women, who are dying by the million, develop a profound fear of pregnancy. Humanity is forced to contemplate the prospect of extinction and the established socio-political order begins to collapse.

Meanwhile, as scientists struggle to find a cure, people reject established institutions and join fundamentalist religions and militant protest groups. For a while, Jessie and her friends deal with their despair at the hand human folly has dealt them by joining a latter day children's crusade against the moral and ecological sins of the fathers. Then, a vague glimmer of hope for the survival of humanity is presented by the Sleeping Beauties. These young women volunteer to become pregnant and to remain in an induced coma until they give birth. Then they die. The existence of the Sleeping Beauties highlights not only clashes of value and ideology, but also our tendency to adopt hypocritical positions in relation to notions of sacrifice and the collective interest. Jessie's emotional journey also encompasses reflections on consumerism, global warming, male violence against women, commercially driven genetic research and, of course, eco-terrorism.

These are issues of tremendous urgency, not just for politicians, scientists and campaigners but for all of us. Rogers' key concern, however, is the way women and men relate to each other: the wedges our consumer-driven society drives between

'us' and 'them' and the way power is allocated on the basis of sex and sexual identity. It is no exaggeration to suggest the way the sexes interact impacts on the way we organise ourselves, the work we do, the things we buy and the morality we adopt. For me, in addition to focussing our thinking on the abuses of science, MDA provides a metaphor for the objectification of women and the commodification of sexuality brought about by the cultural and aesthetic hegemony of the porn industry.

Few contemporary writers could tackle these issues with the forensic clarity of Jane Rogers. And, I would argue, a key factor in her ability to illuminate the themes other writers of serious literary fiction fail to explore lies in her willingness to use the tools and tropes of genre to augment her rigorous observation of the nuances of character and behaviour.

Which brings us to two key questions. Where should this book should be shelved? And who should be reading it?

Rogers uses an sf premise to explore urgent issues with a collective impact. There's a self-limiting tendency in mainstream literary fiction which makes it comparatively poor at reflecting the rapidly changing nature of modern life. For example, it tends to ignore the increasingly fragmented nature of our social networks and the increasingly diverse and significant threats to our survival. These are issues novelists can no longer afford to ignore, and the extrapolatory and speculative nature of sf makes it ideally suited to tackling them. Some critics will assert that Rogers' book is literature, not sf, because of its focus on character development and the psychological make-up of an individual. But, in this respect, it fits firmly into a tradition established in the 1950s by books such as James Blish's hard sf novel *A Case of Conscience*, and reinforced in the 1970s by dystopian classics such as Thomas Disch's *334*.

The quality of writing and subtle observation in *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* means it deserves to be treated as serious literary fiction. The apocalyptic central premise and the sheer inventiveness of the author's investigation of science, society, ideology and morality should earn it a place on every sf bookshelf. This is a book that explores important ideas without sacrificing psychological depth and characterisation. Profoundly enjoyable and deeply unsettling, it opens minds and stomps on genre boundaries: Jane Rogers deserves the widest possible audience.



NEVER NEVER STORIES Jason Sanford

Spotlight Publishing, 240pp, \$15.95 tpb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

Seven of these ten stories were first published in *Interzone* so I'll examine the other three.

'Rumspringa' sees an Amish colony on another planet facing relocation due to an impending comet strike. The Amish haven't changed much but the temptations offered by the 'English' are massively more complex than in our century. It's an excellent exploration of character as much as an examination of technological developments.

'A Twenty-First Century Fairy Love Story' is a straightforward and gentle urban fantasy detailing the interaction between humans and fairy folk. Not a typical Sanford story but unfortunately neither is it one of his best.

'The Never Never Wizard of Apalachicola' nods to several iconic writers in title and execution. An African-American astronaut suffers a seizure after seeing a raven in space in a magical realist exploration of the Southern condition. His family have been tied to the last wizard for centuries and the demands seem extreme. Superb.

There's also a poignant introduction where Sanford, an archaeologist, tells of uncovering a child's grave. Should *Interzone's* Sanford fans spring for this book? On balance, yes. And if you're new to him then this is a very highly recommended collection indeed.



FUTURE MEDIA ed Rick Wilber

Tachyon Publications, 432pp, \$16.95 pb

Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

Dr Rick Wilber is Professor of Journalism at the University of South Florida, and author of more than fifty SF short stories, plus many poems. This big, dense anthology has eleven pieces of fiction and twelve nonfiction pieces, beginning and ending with extracts from Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*. Possibly by ill-luck I happened to read these at the same time as I tackled Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and in both cases I found myself asking: are there nuances here which are possibly too subtle for me, or is the same point being made again and again?

McLuhan's "the medium is the message" is a statement which has to be clarified by exclusion, paring away the unintended meanings until what's left becomes meaningful. Wilber follows it with two very recent pieces on how the electronic media may affect consciousness, perhaps harmfully, and then with an excerpt from *Fahrenheit 451* – not the TV walls, which are mentioned only in passing ('The Veldt' is a metaphor for how those things can devour you), but Montag's discussion with his ambiguous Captain about how books came to be banned – followed by Gregory Benford's 'Centigrade 233', possibly a snapshot of the process. Then follows the description of the 'Feelies' in *Brave New World*, paired with Joe Haldeman's script

for one – written in 1972 but not published till 2006 (why, one wonders?).

If asked for SF stories about the media, which would you next think of? 'The Prize of Peril' by Robert Sheckley, Norman Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron*, for openers, plus Kate Wilhelm's 'Baby, You Were Great', 'At Central' by Kit Reed, James Tiptree's 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In', and they're all here. With them come the more recent 'Rock On' by Pat Cadigan, 'Feel the Zaz' by James Patrick Kelly, and, most recent, an extract from *Makers* by Cory Doctorow (2009). They're interspersed with essays ranging from Vannevar Bush (senior scientific advisor to both Roosevelt and Eisenhower), writing for *Atlantic Monthly* in 1945, to testimony on the future of the worldwide web by its inventor, Timothy Berners-Lee, before the US House of Representatives in 2007. And there's 'Tech-Illa Sunrise' by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, which is billed as an essay but reads like fiction from Moorcock's *New Worlds*.

The question bugging me, not Jack Barron, is what it all adds up to. With the first four or five pieces I thought I saw the direction the anthology was taking, but it slipped away from me. Wilber's notes introducing his contributors are mainly biographical and don't function as links. He aims, first, "to celebrate the inventive social commentary of some of science fiction's best writers and to compare their work to the deep conjecture of scholars and writers ... who have given thought to the future of the mass media and raised perceptive questions about the societal implications of mass media not only today but into the future". In short, not a book one would recommend to everyone as an introduction to SF. Secondly and crucially, "to present readers, especially undergraduate readers taking courses in media studies [my emphasis], with a mix of entertaining, if often quite profound, science-fiction stories centred around the mass media, and add in a similar mix of significant nonfiction articles about the mass media written by important scholars and other thoughtful critics of the field. Several of the articles reprinted here have formed the basic root structure of mass-media studies..."

To sum up, this is a great book on which to base a university course: a skilled lecturer, Wilber himself perhaps, would find examples to draw on in every contribution. That course and the lecturer's insights are the missing piece of the jigsaw.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

CONAN THE BARBARIAN

COWBOYS AND ALIENS

RISE OF THE PLANET
OF THE APES

ARIETTY

KUNG FU PANDA 2

CARS 2

TRANSFORMERS:
DARK OF THE MOON

SUPER 8

HARRY POTTER AND THE
DEATHLY HALLOWS PART II

CAPTAIN AMERICA:
THE FIRST AVENGER

SPY KIDS: ALL THE TIME
IN THE WORLD IN 4D



Seventy-five years ago this summer, a thirty-year-old Texan pulp writer wound up the windows and took a borrowed Colt .380 from the glovebox because he didn't want to outlive his mother. This is still regarded as quite a weird tale, and in 1996 they made an entire movie about it, *The Whole Wide World* with Vincent d'Onofrio as Robert E. Howard and Renée Zellweger as Novalyne Price. It's no wonder that Hollywood is particularly creeped-out by the idea that one of America's key narratologists of manhood might love his mom to death, engaged as it is in its own genocidal war against maternity. Call it the Nemo test: how many of this summer's films killed off the hero's mother? Win one clownfish for dispatching her casually in backstory, two for an actual flashback,

three for executing her in *the very first scene*, and multiply them together if the film manages to kill the heroine's mother as well. Better dress for a busy little bloodbath, because of the eleven films canvassed below, only four score zero on the Nemo scale; and two of those are about machines, while one is a Miyazaki number anyway and consequently pumped full of antibodies to Hollywood infection.

In the Nemo stakes, if sadly not much else, the 2011 version of **CONAN THE BARBARIAN** crushes its enemies and hears the lamentations of their women. Howard's throwaway note, in a letter to Schuyler Miller, that Conan was "born on a battlefield" is literally rendered in the daftest opening scene of the year, as his mortally wounded, heavily up-the-duff mom insists to dad Ron Perlman "I must see our child before I die!", whereupon he performs an impromptu Caesarean with the family sword and plunks the newborn on her chest for her to moniker: "His name is... Conan!" (Dies.) Cut to twelve years later, and future boy Conan proves himself a warrior by killing four Picts in a barmy pagan egggrace, only for Stephen Lang and his tween sorceress daughter to



By the time Bob Howard pulled the trigger on his career after breakfast on June 11, 1936, he had some time since moved on from Conan and the slow-paying *Weird Tales* to a more secure career as a writer of westerns, which offered a different kind of vehicle for his meditations on manhood on the frontier between barbarian integrity and civilised decadence. There's thus an aptness in *Conan's* main writers leaving to do an uncredited early stint on **COWBOYS AND ALIENS**, the other film of the season that's been developed to death and back. Even by Hollywood standards, it's been a project born on a battlefield, its bare three-word concept the object of a fifteen-year tussle for ownership. In 1995 Tom Arvis of Sureshot Comics published a 16-page black-and-white

ashcan title called *Cowboys and Aliens*, which Malibu Comics overlord Scott Mitchell Rosenberg trademarked and sold as a pitch to DreamWorks and Universal as part of his nascent Platinum Comics rights empire, though he didn't actually buy the rights from Arvis until 2004, in a deal which saw Arvis rename his existing series *Wayout West* while Rosenberg developed a new comic under the purchased title as a means to remarket the project back to the studios, who (having earlier let it go to Columbia) promptly ditched the entire comic anyway and cobbled up their own story under a succession of at least twelve writers, of whom six have ended up with actual credits.

There's quite a good sf film in here, though it's not really the one they've made. UFOlogy has long fretted over where all the extraterrestrial visitors were before Kenneth Arnold had his close encounter over Mt Rainier in 1947; and *Cowboys and Aliens* makes quite a serious attempt to imagine an answer that will implant the modern mythology of cattle mutilations, abductions, and mass induced amnesia into a fading post-Civil War west mere months before the arrival of the railroad and the securities of industrial civilisation. Armed

sack their village and force dad to melt his own head (last words: "I love you, son"). Rather than tearing apart the mountains to find his father's killer and follow him to hell, Conan inexplicably gives it a rest for *another* twelve years bridged only by a Morgan Freeman voiceover, during which he hones his skills campaigning against the slave trade by liberating Topless Wenches (credits *sic*) from hempen cages, while Lang and daughter (now a shaven-browed Rose McGowan) seek the last blood of Acheron in a monastery rather fuller than most monasteries tend to be of smoking hot temple virgins. One of these ("Tamara", homaging the proud REH tradition of abjectly rubbish names) is rescued by Conan, who reuses his famous 1934 pickup line to Bêlit "I live, I love, I slay, and I am content," whereupon they go at it like bonobos before she's recaptured to have her blood drained in the obligatory final-ceremony to resurrect Lang's dark-sorceress bride.

Emerging from the tentacled dungeons of development hell like the broken wind of an evil god, this *Conan* is a film not so much made by man as passed by the studio process in the manner of a very

large and painful kidney stone. The vexed project has been through the successive vitals of the Wachowskis, John Milius, Robert Rodriguez, and Brett Ratner before ending up with the distinctly lower-rent Marcus Nispel, with a script from the duo who gave us *A Sound of Thunder* and all-time unexploding bomb *Sahara*, which between them lost nearly \$200m in a single year. Sean Hard, the final polisher and the only other writer to be credited, has done everything in his power to knit the fraying strands back together into something that Howard fans wouldn't be completely appalled at, but it's been one man with a biro against a dark army of gibbering typewriter-monkeys. The credits assert the film to be based on the character rather than the stories, perhaps a nuance of the fraught licensing disputes over the US rights. At any rate no other Howard characters appear at all, and while the plot superficially inhabits Howard's original world and continuity rather more scrupulously than the Milius-Schwarzenegger version (whose very unHowardly dead-dad revenge plot is recycled as the spine), Howard's actual stories are referenced rather than actually

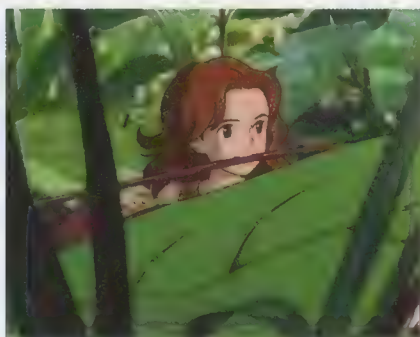
used. People stand in front of luscious greenscreen fantasyscapes captioned with names dutifully transcribed from the Hyborean atlas, and cheesy Hawaiian menu-topper Jason Momoa piles on the ham to deliver as flavoursome a Conan as the script will allow; while the dialogue references "The Tower of the Elephant", and the storyline uses elements from Howard's 1935 valedictory Conan epic *The Hour of the Dragon*. But despite the R-rated Hyborian hijinks with digital blood spatter and rampant 3D rumpy with the leading lady's body double, every single thing has the half-hearted, half-done quality of an idea that everyone was keen on once but has lost interest in along the way: reassembling the Mask of Xaltotun (there's only one piece missing, provided in the first act, and then it doesn't actually work); the leisurely twelve-year quests on both sides; the climactic blood sacrifice that turns out to involve making a little nick and extracting a few thimblefuls before losing interest; McGowan's awesome sorcerous powers which for some reason are entirely forgotten in the sequence leading to her final impalement. But that's what she gets for trying to resurrect her mom.

with their cultural knowledge of the future, the audience recognise the tropes the characters can't, and the allusions to films a century in the unimaginable distance at a time when Ed Muybridge was just beginning to shoot horses up in Palo Alto. But as you'd expect from a film forced to grow a plot from a title, the actual storyline is a concatenation of reflex Hollywood fallbacks, most of them about fathers and sons; and while Daniel Craig's character is merely mourning his woman rather than a mum, Harrison Ford is demographically supplemented with an orphaned grandson and an orphaned redskin surrogate to score the requisite Nemo points. The film is hellbent on being a proper western, which means everyone has to turn their gruff up to eleven and their irony down to minus one, and every single character has to Become a Man, including all the women. Craig looks like Daniel Craig dressed as a cowboy, a growly Ford is plain awful, and mystery girl Olivia Wilde spends the first half of the film as a spare dinner in a frock loitering uselessly on the edge of shots before the big revelation that leaves the second half of the film staring numbly at a huge, bloody logic hole punched in its chest.

A scarcely less intense programme of studio development has gone into **RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES**, which re-reboots the pioneer of the modern sf film franchise from the middle outwards with an alternate take on 1972's *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* in which the simian Spartacus is now a lab-bred super-Nim rather than a talking chimp from the future, and the original's pet-killing virus from outer space becomes the man-made agent of humanity's own evolutionary displacement. *Rise* lets baby Caesar's mommy live a little way into the film before shooting her dead as she tries to protect him, but otherwise it's the *Conan* origin on replay. From this point the film moves crunchingly up through the gears as little Caesar is adopted into an uneasy half-human familial surrogacy by James Franco's disgraced neurochemist, only to be banged up for crimes against humanity and concoct a master plan to let his people go, smarten up his fellow primates, and lead them to the promised land (Muir Woods) on the far side of the red sea-bridge.

Like the cowboys who haven't seen *Close Encounters*, Franco has clearly not watched *Deep Blue Sea* or *Splice*, which

spell out very clearly that seeking a cure for Alzheimer's is strictly for Frankensteins and is entirely likely to lead to a pelting with faeces in the third act; and the film layers in an additional resonance effect from its monkey-see mimesis of both the original 1968 film (with an overused conceit of packing the film with famous quotations repurposed) and the cautionary Darwinian arc of the cycle as a whole. The original *Apes* quintet had the elegantly bonkers idea of shaping itself into a closed loop in which each film was both a sequel and a prequel, something *Rise* partly reworks by having a version of the 1968 film playing offscreen, in a Mars mission that launches and vanishes in the background news, no doubt to emerge from the wormhole in a sequel. As an exercise in performance-capture filmmaking on a hitherto unattempted scale and with a new depth of animal naturalism, it's an undeniable landmark and a triumph for bought-in director Rupert Wyatt, even if the crudely anthropomorphised chimp expressions are a faintly regrettable compromise. Needless to say, of Pierre Boulle's novel there's now not so much as a torch sticking out of the sand.



"You're a doomed species" is a key line in Hiromasa Yonebayashi's classy, melancholic **ARRIETTY**, another update of a classic fable of evolutionary succession. After toying for decades with a film version of Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*, Hayao Miyazaki has finally allowed some of his fingers to be prised off the controls and let his screenplay and designs be storyboarded and directed by someone else, making this the first Miyazaki film since *Panda Kopanda* to be successfully farmed out to another director without either killing him (as *Whisper of the Heart* did to Yoshifumi Kondo) or getting him sacked from the project (as with Mamoru Hosoda on *Howl's Moving Castle*). More surprisingly, Miyazaki has since completed a film with his son Goro, despite what seemed like a fatal rift during the making of *Tales from*

Earthsea. But Miyazaki has been thinking about this film during the making of most of his others, and in his surprisingly faithful rendering of Norton's original series opener you can see the traces of the other films it seeded along the way. The old house filled with fading ancient magic is a clear retrospective forerunner of *My Neighbour Totoro*, while Arrietty's own graduation from childhood and her discovery of an unimaginably vaster world beyond her small, enclosed life in the wainscoting anticipates an arc traversed by his heroines from *Nausicaä* to *Ponyo*. There's even a thumping reference at the climax to Miyazaki's own cameo scene in the Ghibli Museum *Totoro* sequel *Mei and the Kittenbus* (on which Yonebayashi served as animation director).

It's a lovely and haunting film which ditches Norton's narrative frame and moves the imperial Victorian setting to present-day Koganei, the neighbourhood of Ghibli's own premises, though the size of the garden and surrounding wilderness show a lively disdain for the realities of Tokyo urban geography. One significant disappointment is the UK dub by Working Title, which struggles to live up to the quality of the Disney dubs of earlier Ghibli films, with poor matching to lip flaps and some surprisingly lifeless voice

performances. Saoirse Ronan is a coup for Arrietty, but turns out to be nothing special; while Mark Strong's laconic, slow-spoken Pod has to pause heavily on every syllable to match the characteristic timing and delivery of a Japanese paterfamilias. The film goes out of its way to dangle, then snatch away, a cutout Hollywood ending in which the wainscot-dwelling Clock family will settle happily ever after in the customised doll's house that has been waiting two generations for them to take residence. (This is more or less the ending of the 1997 film version, and indeed of Norton's later sequels.) That it all goes irreparably wrong is faithful to the book on a literal level, but misses the original emotional importance of Arrietty's final escape into the wider world she has always dreamed of. Miyazaki not only plays down her driving wanderlust and impatience with confinement, but somewhat misses the book's imaginative and emotional fulcrum: Arrietty's conceptual breakthrough as she realises that the Borrower view of the world on which she's been raised, according to which Borrowers are the dominant species and human beans few and insignificant, is the exact reverse of reality, and that she and her scattered folk are the last of a waning kind in a world of heedless monsters.

The same discovery is made by the chubby hero of **KUNG FU PANDA 2**, one of a pair of rival tentpole animation sequels from Pixar and DreamWorks set on eerie Bouleau parallel earths in which humanity has been erased and its evolutionary niche reoccupied, in this by an entire anthropomorphic ecosystem of talking animals. Normally it's Pixar that burgles from Ghibli, but *Panda 2* draws palpably not just on *Panda Kopanda* but less expectedly on *Princess Mononoke*, for a beast-fable about the moment

where gunpowder technology threatens to blow the balance of nature into fiery apocalypse in the name of civilisation. The animation is very, very strong, with a lot of 3D plunging through insanely gorgeous landscapes at DreamWorks' signature coked-up pace. Less happy is the hero's own quest for identity, as Po's belated realisation that the laws of cartoon genetics do not extend to male comedy geese giving birth to placental mammals sets him on the trail of his birth parents, a *Conan*-style quest for revenge on their killer, and the

discovery that he is Moses and Jesus in one big plush cuddly package. The queasy message to adopted kids is that (i) you need to track down and disown your birth parents in order ever to feel inner peace, and (ii) actually when you come down to it it's only dads who really count. Since killing Po's mom on screen during the flashbacked panda genocide would be a little strong for the target audience, the door is technically open for a reverse-Nemo retcon in a sequel; but in view of the focus of the final twist it would be rash to uplift hopes.

Pixar's still more posthuman **CARS 2** is calculated to baffle anyone unfamiliar with its franchise's history since the original 2006 film, and particularly the displacement of speed racer Lightning McQueen by hick sidekick Tow Mater as the breakout character via the *Mater's Tall Tales* series of shorts – which have also gradually been opening up the action from the backwater of Radiator Springs to the wider autobot universe and a more fantastic brand of action, including a

Tokyo Drift episode anticipating the more lavish sequence in *Cars 2*. John Lasseter's unsettling vision of a world populated by sentient machines is now extended to the entire planet in a globespanning nonsense about a petroleum-substitute wonder fuel being promoted in a series of mysteriously sabotaged Grand Prix in international settings, including a hauntingly unpeopled downtown Tokyo. Profoundly strange and resonant in ways its makers clearly have no conception of whatever, it shows us a

world in which cars, our former pets, have aped our civilisation so completely as to erase us from their evolutionary history while mimicking our entertainment genres and urban landscape. Pixar have elaborate future plans for the brand, with confident disregard for whether anyone actually cares; but as Emily Mortimer's character says to Mater, "If people aren't taking you seriously, then they need to change, not you." The more you turn that over the more sinister it sounds.



There are times in **TRANSFORMERS: DARK OF THE MOON** where you seem to be watching a *Battle for the Planet of the Cars* that could be either a long-lost prequel or a far distant sequel, and all that's needed is for the lost Autobot homeworld Cybertron to turn out to be our own far future Earth, its doom the detonation of the Alpha-Omega device by some mecha Charlton Heston after the discovery on the beach of a colossal statue of Lightning McQueen and Mater. "We were once," says Optimus in the opening voiceover, "a race of peaceful mechanical beings;" and you can indeed imagine *Cars 2* being watched by little Autobots at the drive-in back on Cybertron. *Dark of the Moon* begins with yet another chapter of the secret history of the sixties, with the entire moon programme a covert operation to secure a Cybertronic wreck on the far side before the Decepticons shut it down through "creative accounting". We might have known the war against the machines was already under way. Already in the first act, as our hero trades in his girlfriend for a younger model and completes his trilogic rite of manhood from high school to college to employment, we see that Decepticons have already infiltrated the workplace ahead of him and are in our copiers, our monitors, our mice. Otherwise, despite the promises, it's essentially *Revenge of the Fallen II*, with another of those final-hour retreats from narrative as the characters battle their way across a few hundred yards of disputed territory, though here in downtown Chicago rather than across the Egyptian desert. On the upside, the 3D is the year's best in live action, and the trilogy still hasn't actually killed off Shia's mom, though in this one he does order her to remove herself to a safe distance from the film – not without reason, as by the end Cybertron itself is brought into apocalyptic proximity to Earth in a Michael Bay premake of *Melancholia*, or possibly just an *Armageddon* reboot.



J.J. Abrams takes us back to the original Transformers era in the lovingly rendered Spielberg pastiche **SUPER 8**, which surpasses *Conan* in executing its young hero's mother in the very first shot with its smugly slick storytelling move showing a Days Since Last Accident sign change from 734 to 1. But as the makeup guy in a team of first-generation Spielberg brats making 8mm George Romero tributes, our boy is able to get up close with the similarly motherless Elle Fanning (double Nemo!) despite her being wildly out of his or anyone else's class; and when weird things happen after a military train crashes

in the back of their shot, a boy's life turns out to hold the key to turning *Cloverfield* back into *ET*. For those who were there, this is all rather wishful. *Famous Monsters* was always big on makeup techniques, but even we didn't think that collecting back issues would give us the skills we needed to touch up girls, let alone that building kit models might give you access to specialist military technical info, an understanding of alien Lego, and girls who, on seeing your bedroom, say admiringly "Did you build all these models?" (This has never been uttered with neither contempt or pity by any girl to any boy, ever.) But like *Cowboys and Aliens*, it uses its period setting and a superabundance of dead moms to reflect exploitatively on family and coming of age, with the autobiographical elements adding a *Social Network* feel of watching the early lives of the future masters of cinema unfold. It looks, as it means to, like memories: an everlasting 1979 made unaging by a waning technology where dead parents still live unaging in an everlasting seventies summer. Who wouldn't want to live there?



Lost parents and the end of childhood loom still larger in **HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS PART II**, the dying 200 pages of our generation's mightiest test of fortitude and endurance, at the end of which Harry and his chums are left gazing out into the sunshine from the rubble of practically the entire British film industry, before we cut to 19 years later and the reassurance that even in the future they'll still have heritage railway, selective schooling, and sorting hats. A film without any exposition at all until the obligatory pensieve-dunk and Dumbledore megalogue in the final act, it defies the viewer to remember what Griphook and Ollivander were doing in their cottage in the first place or what exactly it is in that locket of plot that cheekily promises to open at the close; and the plot rushes by with the Deathly Hallows themselves largely dropped from serious attention. As a feelgood film about a high school massacre, the film has had to tread even more carefully

than the book, which did allow one (1) of its fifty slaughtered children to be an actual named character; here the underage dead are entirely anonymised, their faces tastefully unseen like the civilian casualties of friendly-fire atrocities. The heroically indefatigable David Yates is still reduced to shooting around the stuff the leads still can't do: noticing the way the brief, belated snog between Ron and Hermione shows neither actor's face, one wonders what the other takes can have been like to be still less usable. But the adults, knowing their last hurrah is upon them, ratchet up their performances to 11.9 on the Rickman scale, with one last slug of polyjuice allowing Helena Bonham Carter to play an imaginary alternate Emma Watson who can actually play Hermione well, badly playing Bonham Carter playing Bellatrix Lestrange brilliantly, which she does with stunningly convincing lack of conviction. All know only too well that nothing like this will be attempted again, and that the *Potter* films will stand for all time as cinema's own Apollo programme: a vast and irreplicable collective endeavour between thousands of modestly talented but deeply professional people that harnessed a moment and an opportunity to make something transformative from materials of woefully uneven potential.



The one contemporary film project to rival the ambition of the *Potter* franchise is the *Avengers* cycle, now at episode five of its initial sextet with **CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE FIRST AVENGER**. The comparison with *Potter* is rather unfair, as the Marvel movieverse is a much looser assemblage of episodic rather than serial storytelling, with four different casts and nothing remotely corresponding to the *Potter* films' mixed adventures in thespian childraising or David Yates' endurance stint at the helm. But with some of the cast contracted for up to ten films in the first instance, and further *Iron Man* and *Thor*

films already inked in for 2013 release dates, Kevin Feige's loony enterprise is on track to deliver eight pictures in half the *Potter* time before any of its other franchises in development are even out of the gate. If *Thor* was the linchpin, the film that finally opened out the Marvel screen universe to cosmic dimensions, *Captain America* is the instalment that puts the beating heart of the Marvel universe in its now fully weaponised body, rewinding superhero history to its moment of creation in Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's wartime hero lab. A nostalgically straight-up tribute to the greatest generation of comics creators, it argues for the silver-age superhero as an unfreezing of the spirit of '43, pilfering its climax without shame, but with considerable aptness, from the opening of *A Matter of Life and Death*. It's a wonderful thing that the 97-year-old Joe Simon should have lived to see his creation emerge from the ice to conquer the world seventy years after his first birth – even if he left the title a year into its run and it's Smiling Stan up on the screen with all the medals.



Robert Rodriguez, whose relationship with *Conan*'s Rose McGowan at the time of his own brief involvement with the project ended up unwinding his own family, unfreezes his much-loved gadget franchise with **SPY KIDS: ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD IN 4D**, a generation-bridger handing over from the all-grown-up original kids to Jessica Alba's sibling branch of the extended family with bonus spy baby and robomutt. A monument to Texan job creation with a thanks in the credits to Governor & Mrs Rick Perry, it's nevertheless been a huge flop domestically, which has all the series ingredients in the bowl but just doesn't seem able to get the mix to rise. The new kids are fine and have good comedy bicker-chemistry; Alba gives it everything she's got as the heroic stepmom who thanklessly juggles family anchoring with covert counterops; and a loopy premise about stealing time out of the world is ingeniously flogged

to death as a parable of family life. Having pioneered the 3D revival in his last two kids' films, Rodriguez' signature greenscreen digital universe finally gets to breathe in full stereoscopic colour, with nice use of a clockwork visual theme. The fourth dimension proves not to be the usual Einsteinian one but "the very latest in senso-aromatic technology", a scratch-and-sniff card cued erratically to moments on screen as in John Waters' *Polyester*; this fails abjectly, to the point where you seriously wonder whether the cards have been misprinted with eight versions of the same candy-counter smell. Ricky Gervais has evidently been allowed to write his own dialogue for cyberpooch, which as usual is in a different style from the rest of the film and only very sporadically funny in any sense the rest of the film would recognise, but it's still quite hard to lose with a ninja dog sequence; while Alba's stunt fights (i) in labour and (ii) with a baby strapped to her chest are at least a concept that had to be tried. It seems a shame for such a full-on attempt at matrocentric entertainment to wind up dying on the battlefield; but one can't help noting that even this paean to momhood has killed off the spyings' natural mother to let younger, hotter Alba in the door. Either we flush these fish down the toilet, or we're going to need a bigger tank.

LASER FODDER TONY LEE

THE TWILIGHT ZONE SEASON 3

SOURCE CODE *

LA JETÉE + LEVEL FIVE +
SANS SOLEIL

THE VAMPIRE DIARIES SEASON 2

STARGATE UNIVERSE SEASON 2

SUPERNATURAL SEASON 6

INSIDIOUS

JULIA'S EYES *

EUREKA SEASON 4

51

QUATERMASS AND THE PIT *

WAREHOUSE 13 SEASON 2

MUCKMAN

CANNIBAL HOLOCAUST

2001 NIGHTS

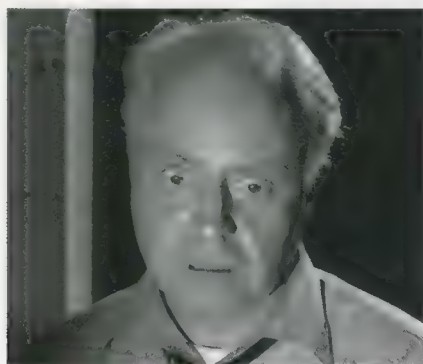
USED CLUMPAGE: ROUND UP

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It seems odd to me that serial TV (with core/regular characters if not always episodic narratives or seasonal story-arcs) is more fashionable than anthology shows, which offer nearly unlimited possibilities for scenarios. Even if we consider TV material that is outside of genre concerns, the same preference is evident. But why do British soap operas remain popular when programmes like *Armchair Theatre* (1956–80) and *Play for Today* (1970–84) have become passé? Are those particular examples simply cases where public interest in home entertainments rooted in the actorly conventions of the stage instead of cinematic spectacle has just faded away with no hope of recovery? It's clear that *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* have consistently rated way ahead of anthology formats such as *The Outer Limits* (1963–5, plus its 1995–2002 revival) or *Out of the Unknown* (1965–71). But, again, why is a continuity of casting and milieu favoured by viewers when endless changes and the surprises of newness as the only constant have so much more to offer? Are imaginations really fixated upon comforts of the familiar? Perhaps this has a correlation across mainstream Lit culture, where chaptered novels are bought or borrowed in tonnage, while short-story collections or fiction merchants – like this magazine – have become niche markets, struggling to maintain readerships.

THE TWILIGHT ZONE – SEASON THREE (Blu-ray/DVD, 1 August) dates from 1961, and has a distinct emphasis upon cross-genre stuff, often subverting trad Americana. War stories (Civil War, WW2, Cold War) and western dramas with a fantastique twist, far-fetched comedy adventures, bad omens/weird surrealism, and psychological horrors with a healthy dose of brooding melancholia have become highly prized inventory. One-off casting presents plenty of eminent names to please big-star spotters. Charles Bronson and Elizabeth Montgomery portray the only



survivors of a namelessly apocalyptic war in *Two*. Jack Klugman wants to be a winner by playing against a long dead champion in *A Game of Pool*. Lee Marvin stars with Strother Martin and Lee Van Cleef in ghost story *The Grave*, set in the 'mild west'.

A planet-killing heatwave from *The Midnight Sun* parallels the same year's British film *Day the Earth Caught Fire*. It's *A Good Life* sees Billy Mumy (*Lost in Space*, *Babylon 5*) playing an evil boy with terrifying powers – a role which he returned to half a lifetime later for *Twilight Zone* revival sequel *It's Still a Good Life* (2003).

Nothing in the Dark features an (impossibly) young Robert Redford as the charming Mr Death. Buster Keaton fumbles somewhat embarrassingly through silent/slapstick homage *Once Upon a Time*, a time-travel farce by Richard Matheson. A gung-ho US army lieutenant (Dean Stockwell) learns some humility in *A Quality of Mercy* and there's Leonard Nimoy in the supporting cast!

A homeless man gets a criminal personality change in *Dead Man Shoes* (a Charles Beaumont-scripted tragedy remade during the 1980s, with *Dead Woman's Shoes* for Helen Mirren). *Kick the Can* is a delightful and yet deeply sentimental tale of the elderly finding youthful rejuvenation in children's silly games, directed by Lamont Johnson. It was remade by Spielberg – regrettably with maximum schmaltz – for a segment of *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983).

Rod Serling adapts Damon Knight's satirical alien-conquest short story about 'human harvesting' *To Serve Man*. Creepy 'kidnapping' tale *Little Girl Lost* was the inspiration, twenty years later, for Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist*.

One of *Twilight Zone*'s most proficient directors, John Brahm (*Time Enough at Last*, *A Nice Place to Visit*, *Judgement Night*, *Shadow Play*) makes the mystery of *Person or Persons Unknown* a quintessential loss-

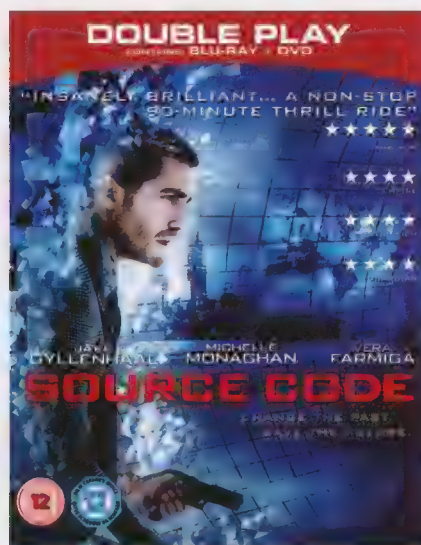


of-identity nightmare. *The Little People* is quasi-Swiftian drama about one arrogant spaceman's hubris in claiming the position of godhood to a micro-alien nation, while a fellow astronaut (Claude Atkins) essays a voice of reason without luck. Borrowing from British classic portmanteau-movie *Dead of Night*, and pre-empting Richard Attenborough's *Magic* (1978), *The Dummy* sees Cliff Robertson on top form as a disturbed schizo ventriloquist.

Ray Bradbury's heartfelt SF fable *I Sing the Body Electric* has a cyber-granny (Josephine Hutchinson, a robo-Mary Poppins) raising a widower's kids. Veronica Cartwright (a year before she was terrorised by Hitchcock in *The Birds*) shines here as sulky daughter Anne, overcoming lingering grief with help from indestructible and indefatigable 'grandma'. The ending is just ghastly saccharine twaddle but some of the original story's Bradburyisms of warmth/sincerity are kept intact.

Finally, in *The Changing of the Guard*, Donald Pleasance plays a professorial retiree facing compulsory redundancy, feeling suicidally despondent but discovering that his invisible legacy of success in education is revealed by ghosts. It's corny but so well performed by Pleasance that its Capra-esque flaws are dismissed easily.

For best quality entertainment, *Twilight Zone* remains the premier TV format, with genre potential far exceeding that of *Who*, *Trek*, *X-Files*, *UFO*, *B5*, *BSG*, or what have you. Why put up with the same old faces on telly when every new episode could be a different story entirely? Although a recent attempt to kick start a new genre TV anthology, *Masters of Science Fiction* (only six episodes made; see *Interzone* #216), failed to attract a significant following, let's hope this re-release of a classic series on Blu-ray will generate a lot more interest in another *Twilight Zone*/*Outer Limits* style revival. There are many thousands of great stories waiting to be adapted for TV sci-fi!



WIN

Chris Marker's 1962 'photo-novel' **LA JETÉE** (DVD, 22 August) is a cult SF short film composed mostly of still images. With a voiceover narration, it plays like a slideshow and prompts the question: is it genuine 'arty' filmmaking, genre or otherwise? Can it now be viewed as just a set of storyboards that inspired Terry Gilliam's immeasurably superior satire *12 Monkeys* (1995)? Marker's pseudo-documentary **LEVEL FIVE** (DVD, 22 August), made in 1997, is comprised of archive clips, found footage, talking-heads interviews, and clunky video art. A French writer works on her programming job for a computer game about WW2's Battle of Okinawa. Marker's micro-budget production is letdown by terrible cheapness of its sci-fi props and some laughably crude imagery for 'cyberspace' (which is insulting to SF fans, really, when this was made a couple of years after *Johnny Mnemonic* and cult TV series *VR-5*). Hell, even mid-1980s' *Max Headroom* had better graphics! It is pretentious intellectual twaddle of philosophical musings on memories, warfare, and inexplicable Japanese suicides. There is nothing particularly enlightening here. Mamoru Oshii's magnificently enigmatic and moodily multicultural *Avalon* (2001) was better genre cinema about VR and war games. Along with Marker's 1983 feature, **SANS SOLEIL** (re-released on the same DVD as *La Jetée*), *L5* is simply part of Marker's curiously obscure, meditative art house oeuvre that does not compare favourably to Godfrey Reggio's highly acclaimed *Qatsi* trilogy.

Moon director Duncan Jones returns with **SOURCE CODE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 15 August), a time-loop scenario with a secret government project exploiting a US serviceman's hotwired brain to retrospectively solve a Chicago train bombing, and so avert further terrorism from the 21st century's fearsome WMD spectre of a dirty nuke. With *Groundhog Day* repetitions compacted from an eventful 24 hours into a leisurely eight minutes dream time, here is Tony Scott's tragic mystery *Déjà Vu* spliced together with Jack Sholder's comedic romance *12:01* for a sci-fi narrative refocused through a *Quantum Leap* lens of parallel/alternative timelines. It's a subgenre plot which retcons itself shamelessly, to suggest a flexi-fate in multiverse reality bending to human will for a happy ending. Jake Gyllenhaal (*Donnie Darko*), Michelle Monaghan

(*Eagle Eye*), and Vera Farmiga (*Orphan*) are roundly capable as their respective cyphers of agent/pawn, operator/player, and a winnable prize. However, when the most resonant line is "everything is gonna be okay," this preposterous movie's wholly overlong structures of mechanistic luck crash down into debris of empty mind games. *Source Code* is watchable, but it is simply unregulated eigenstate silliness that the SF logic police might scoff at. If you want a thriller with some phildickian twists driven by a countdown clock, those probability clouds collapsing in Lee Tamahori's *Next* offer more dynamism for witty adventuring in self-determinism.

We have 5 Double Plays to give away. Use SOURCE CODE as your subject line. See page 56 for other instructions, closing date, etc.



Following a telefantasy trend established by the successes of *Buffy* and *Angel*, new shows like *Blood Ties* (2006), *Moonlight* (2007), *True Blood* (from 2008), and the *Twilight* movies opened sluice gates to further supernatural romance on TV in **THE VAMPIRE DIARIES – SEASON TWO** (DVD, 22 August), adapting Lisa Jane Smith's 1990s' novels, and launched in 2009. This subgenre chronology evidences a glut of chic gothic tripe, and has little to do with subverting familiar vampire lore beyond populist convention. The small town of Mystic Falls, Georgia is home to elfin teen Elena (petulant, frowny Nina Dobrev, *Never Cry Werewolf*) who falls for nice guy Stefan (Paul Wesley), hero with all the charisma of a new telephone pole. His brother Damon (Ian Somerhalder), a bad boy stereotype, also lusts after heroine Elena. Together, these vampire brothers are like binary poison for the town. The scenario is complicated by 19th century villainess Katherine (also played by Dobrev), Elena's ancestor, bringing "doppelganger hi-jinks" but no weird

charm. Bloody genre chick-lit gubbins? Oh yes, and then some... Packed with cringe-a-minute clichés, the rapidity of its plots and a vacuity of characterisation are seemingly endemic, and the show is almost entirely humourless, lacking wit in either dialogue or behaviour. Vampires have reflections, and wear magic rings to walk in sunshine, and centuries-old immortals appear satisfied in conforming to schoolgirl romanticism without any reason except for the popularity of Meyer's sexless *Twilight* saga. Meddlesome teens uncover secret histories of the town's founding families, and "according to legend, a werewolf bite can kill a vampire," but this is all such a terribly mediocre depiction of a confrontation between good and evil. It's hideously contrived teen-appeal telly with especially bland leads cast from a department of shallow pretty people, typically specialising in characterless overacting (troublemaker Damon boasts flapping brows, squinty eyes, wicked sneers) because they are obviously lacking many other talents. Overexposure of this subgenre has drained all subtlety and nuance from sexy vampires, reducing – via checklist efficiencies – any potential vitality of its mise-en-scène into a formulaic series of modern poseur tableaux, wherein every traditional (there's not a hint of postmodernism here!) sketch of suspense, drama, or action, cuts to black, accompanied by that exclamatory sound effect like a distant thunderclap. Oh but, sadly, it doesn't end there. *Vampire Diaries* has been renewed for a third season.



While the complete *Stargate Atlantis Seasons One to Five* boxset premieres on Blu-ray (19 September), here's **STARGATE UNIVERSE – SEASON TWO** (DVD, 29 August) to bring this latest *Stargate* spin-off telly series to a close. My coverage of season one in *Interzone* #230 noted that *SGU* is much better than any previous *SG* series, although it “remains pedestrian as science fiction” and is “largely driven by plot and character” that's often mired in soapy conventions. Very little has changed. After a hijacking by enemies in the Lucian alliance, Earth folks regain control of gigantic starship *Destiny*

and resume a mission cruising distant galaxies. Cranky Dr Rush (Robert Carlyle) has broken the access codes to *Destiny's* bridge. He wants to discover some kind of great, hopefully noble, truth and thinks *Destiny's* millennia long flight holds the key to fully understanding the cosmos, but now he's haunted by his dead wife (Louise Lombard). Colonel Young (Louis Ferreira) only wants to get back home to Earth, but is haunted by guilt over his failures as expedition leader. The scientist and soldier heroes decide against killing each other for the sake of the crew. Unlike a lost-in-space odyssey, or a van Vogtian *Trek* restaging of ‘first contact’ encounters, *SGU* is a quite dispiritingly feeble saga of human survival in almost constant adversity, with a motley crew of refugees (star ‘boat people’?) stumbling along from one crisis to another. Finding a *Destiny*-like ‘seed’ ship, where stargates are made before the teleport portals are positioned on suitable planets, seems like a godsend, although it's the first of several hackneyed story-arc twists which undermine credibility with a vast muddle of cross-genre riffs. Space ‘western’ episode *Malice* has mourning Dr Rush in vengeance mode, hunting a serial killer under alien skies. The mythical Ancients’ intergalactic ‘communications’ system finally makes witty science fictional use of its body-swap utility, following an accident

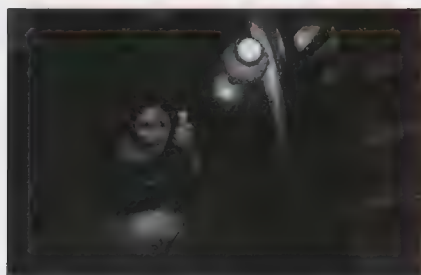
which results in a somewhat amusing variation on a ‘love triangle’ staple, as three men, in love with three different women, find their emotions tested when all of the women's consciousnesses share one body for capriciously unpredictable multiple-personality/erratic identity chaos! Later, a bog-standard time-travel explanation is offered for discovery of a ‘lost civilisation’, apparently descendants of *Destiny's* crew. The show bows out on a grace note, though, with *Destiny's* conversion to a space ark. Overall, it's science fiction with all the veracity of neo-Chinese whispers; a space soap opera remix with infantile navel-gazing sentimentality and the self-blinding delusions of religion (“out here on the edge of the universe, who you are and what you believe is everything”), which invites comparisons with disgruntling aspects of the *BSG* remake. The main flaw is that *SGU* attempts to support the flaky theological guff of ‘intelligent design’ – in this, it is even more annoying than short-lived TV series *Defying Gravity* (inspired by Joe Ahearne's *Space Odyssey: Voyage to the Planets*), which embarked on a similar ‘search for god’ before it was cancelled (due to lack of interest?). As a sci-fi TV drama that really needed to serve food-for-thought, *SGU* has only the value-for-money/nutritional content of an everlasting gobstopper.



Winchester brothers Sam and Dean are young padawans of paranormal investigation in Eric Kripke's **SUPERNATURAL – SEASON SIX** (DVD, 29 August), not another *X-Files* clone yet hardly a radical departure from that much-copied winning formula. Mitch Pileggi, as granddad Samuel, grants the *X-Files* connection high significance. Perhaps the oddest character is redneck ‘Dumbledore’/researcher Bobby Singer (Jim Beaver, *Deadwood*). While Sam (Jared Padalecki, *Friday the 13th* remake, *Cry*

Wolf) went to hell during the previous season's apocalyptic finale, Dean (Jensen Ackles, *My Bloody Valentine* remake, *Dark Angel* TV series) gave up hunting down supernatural threats, attempting – albeit briefly – to have a normal life with girlfriend Lisa (Cindy Sampson, *High Plains Invaders*). Now, Sam and Dean are reunited a year later, primed but not fully debriefed for tackling more bizarre crimes, outbreaks of weirdness, and creature slaying missions, in which they are sometimes helped by ‘wing-man’ Cass, alias angel Castiel (deadpan Misha Collins) – “a multidimensional wavelength of celestial intent” allegedly fighting in a civil war in heaven. Evil angel Balthazar (Sebastian Roché, who played ‘Thomas Jerome Newton’ in *Fringe*) is buying human souls in trade for occult weapons. The brothers are coerced into working for demon Crowley (Mark Sheppard, *Leverage*). Disappointingly, the season arc's main twist (about Sam's soul) is entirely predictable. Even with the clear positive influence of *Angel* TV series and *Constantine* movie,

the nagging flaw of this show is not its unexceptional plots and various spoofy film/TV references – explicit in punster episode titles such as *Live Free or Twihard*, concerning Dean's one-man attack on an alpha vampire's nest, that demolishes naïve fantasies of *Twilight/Vampire Diaries* to expose depraved monsters in bloodsucking mythos – or the largely derivative cross-genre content (the UFO abductee/faerie close encounters farce is an *X* case in point), it's the unfortunately middling performances as heroes by stars Padalecki and Ackles, who are rarely engaging as principals beyond their occasionally competent delivery of amusing geeky dialogue, as both actors often slip into a merely average TV standard of unpolished woodenness that undermines all the appeal of their supposedly fearless/macho characters. Ineptly combining comedy and horror does not help much. Whenever reaching for inspiration while aiming to be inventive, *Supernatural* trips over clumsily (so cryptozoological it's embarrassing) in a vaguely Fortean pratfall mode.



From the creators of *Saw*, creep-fest **INSIDIOUS** (Blu-ray/DVD, 12 September) sees the Lambert family moving into a new home, where songwriter Renai (Rose Byrne) and teacher Josh (Patrick Wilson) are affected quite differently when their son falls down in the 'empty' attic and then slips, inexplicably, into a three-month coma. Then, strange voices in the nursery seem to threaten their baby girl. Spectral visitors in the dead of night increase the pressure, and another house flit brings no relief. There are bloody handprints, demonic faces, and shadowy figures to contend with. Calling in a geek pair with techno toys to play at ghostbusters only results in evil forces putting the frighteners on with a vengeance, pushing apart the emotionally fragile Renai and disbelieving Josh: "How did the voice of reason become the bad guy here?" Now, we have blatant *Paranormal Activity* repetitions, a cynical séance farce, and jumpy skits that are all enhanced by scratchy violins. Soon, dad's secret is out, and he must spoof Doc Strange for his astral-projection rescue-mission to save his 'lost' son, who has become stuck in a realm called 'the Further.' Yes, every gothic tableau, supernatural timewarp cliché, and then some, are recycled for this spiritualist dilemma, balancing raw tragedy and sidebar comedy, like those conjurer's plates kept spinning atop long sticks. It looks clever but is merely absurd: do you want to 'tiptoe through the tulips' and dry ice indoor fogs with that malevolent red-faced puppeteer? Obviously, the plot kernel and climax of *Insidious* borrows heavily from Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist*, without adding any imaginative twists – although this is not actually a 'wicked child' movie (like my recent favourites *Case 39* and *Orphan*) that it appears to be at first. For genre-literate viewers, James Wan's *Insidious* never once comes close to being unsettling, let alone genuinely disturbing, with its numerous 'Boo! Gotcha' antics... But, then again, the film hardly bothers to try escaping from its carnival-of-terrors/ghost-train-of-cinema conventions.



WIN

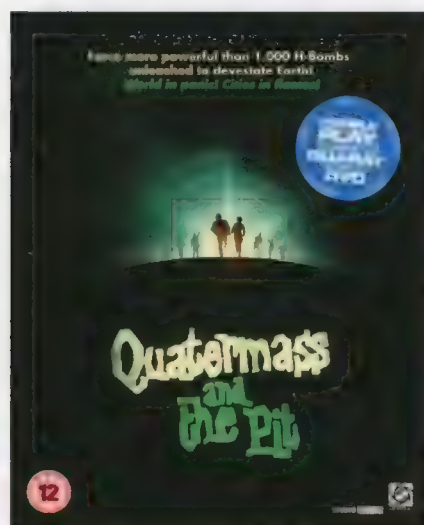
While apparently alone at home, blind and tormented Sara hangs herself in the cellar. Twin sister Julia – ironically, an astronomer – somehow knows, instantly, and rushes to the house. In morbid tragedy, Julia is also suffering from the same condition which took Sara's sight and, even after an operation, Julia's vision degrades suddenly under emotional stress. **JULIA'S EYES** (Blu-ray/DVD, 12 September) is directed by Guillem Morales (maker of home-intruder variant *The Uncertain Guest*). It's an assemblage of overly familiar borderline genre thriller tropes, which results in a disappointingly routine mystery. Psychic bond between Sara and Julia (both played

by Belén Rueda)? Yes, of course. 'Invisible' man (a strange misfit that nobody notices)? No big surprise. Plot twist of marital infidelity? Check. Investigating heroine in dire peril? Absolutely! There are scenes with menacing shadows and moments in a claustrophobic darkness, exploring how blindness affects individuals and how the blind may seem threatening to a sighted person. Deplorably, though, it's a film which tends to demonise the blind, which smears the already emotionally skewed narrative with a certain social ugliness. What remains, when such flaws of gross exaggeration are cast aside, is a passable art house thriller. Sadly, this grips only like a geriatric wrestler with broken fingers. Bags of visual style that is typical for modern Spanish cinema (see Balagueró's *Fragile*, *The Nameless*, or Bayona's *The Orphanage*) amounts to very little for a weak genre movie that is all flash and hardly any substance. Kudos to producers for casting a glamorous 45-year-old lead when a Hollywood version would probably have blundered with one of their numerous catwalk starlets, but, just like her starring role in *The Orphanage*, Rueda is merely halfway convincing. She's only minimally successful at winning sympathy for her plight.

We have 3 Blu-rays to give away. Use JULIA'S EYES as your subject line.

Begun in 2006, Andrew Cosby and Jaime Paglia's TV comedy-drama *A Town Called Eureka* is quirky SyFy Channel adventure, with Sheriff Jack Carter (Colin Ferguson) policing hi-tech mishaps by a secret community of scientific geniuses. Released under its US title on DVD, **EUREKA – SEASON 4.0** (19 September) offers a batch of episodes from last year. Nearly everyone in Eureka works for the DARPA-like Global Dynamics corporate agency. With revised characters and support casts, season four starts with a timewarp going back to 1947, to visit founding days of the DoD 'Camp Eureka', where Einstein's associate Dr Grant (James Callis, *BSG* remake) helps Carter and the other regulars return home to their present. However, Grant joins them in the 21st century, finding a divergent timeline, where mainstays' personal/professional situations have changed: for example, action-girl cop Jo (Erica Cerra) is replaced by android deputy Andy, and Jo becomes new security chief at GD. Federal agent Dr Allison Blake (Salli Richardson-Whitfield) still appears in control as overseer of all boffins, which include ethical polymath Henry (Joe Morton) and nerdy Fargo (Neil Grayston), now acting 'head of research' amidst occasionally irritating eccentrics. *Crossing Over* guest stars Allison Scagliotti as techno geek Claudia, visiting Eureka from similar genre milieu of *Warehouse 13*. In other episodes, rage virus, rocket fest, and robot rampage share SF disaster conceits. *The Ex-Files* is nuisance hallucinations day as 'ghosts' of old flames burn up the town. *I'll Be Seeing You* replays timewarp shenanigans, adding a paradox twist, life-saving heroism, and further conspiratorial exploits. Town's nice-guy sheriff handles diverse problems with renowned 'everyman logic' ("Anomalous... That's bad, right?"). When its super-science becomes too complex or unwieldy, *Eureka* reverts to lightshow CGI, anthropomorphic mecha distractions, stunt chases, lab explosions, or smart-aleck quips. It's basically a silly show, not a slightly more serious genre drama like *Fringe*, and *Eureka* often gets sidetracked into dreary 'wanna talk about it?' soap opera – whether you want to hear about it or not.

Its genre address is on the rundown outskirts of weird town, in a rather disreputable skiffy neighbourhood. Yes, **51** (DVD/Blu-ray, 19 September) is about infamous Area 51, of great renown to nut clusters of UFO and conspiracy theorists. This low-budget sci-fi horror is not a remake, but a corny throwback to the VHS era, when cheap monster movies blatantly imitating *Aliens* and *CE3K* were rife, and lay in ambush on the wall racks of video shops like a gallery of sadly garish graffitied tombstones representing a dying subgenre... Jason Connery (maker of *Devil's Tomb*) directs without recognising the 'banality of evil' rule. One 'nice' ET midget helps out with the inevitable battles of wit (no, strike that... witlessness!) against other aliens named 'Lady Death' and 'Little Devil' held captive in that desert airbase bunker. Bruce Boxleitner (*Tron*, *Babylon 5*) bluffs his way through as the rogue colonel turning against his command; John Shea (*Mutant X*) as America's top newsman, feigns interest in uncovering military secrets; and cute Rachel Miner (*Butterfly Effect 3*) acts tough as the sergeant heroine, failing to save viewers from a whole plague of both visual and narrative clichés that descend from whatever blind spot in America's movie-land skies hackneyed trash filmmaking is considered worth doing. Shush! Keep this one a secret. If you happen to glimpse its trailer, or notice the DVD on sale, tell no-one about it. Please move along, folks, there is nothing to see here.



WIN

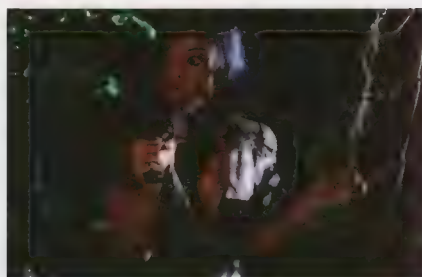
"The figure was small, like a hideous dwarf." Roy Ward Baker's classic Hammer film **QUATERMASS AND THE PIT** (aka: *Five Million Years to Earth*, 1967), fully restored and re-mastered for Blu-ray (19 September), remains arguably the best production about creator Nigel Kneale's science hero Professor Bernard Quatermass. Some may prefer *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955), or *Quatermass 2* (1957), or even the 1979 TV series which starred John Mills, but for most SF aficionados this is it, the finest work of Prof Q's illustrious career. Construction digging at Hobbs End underground station is halted by the unearthing of prehistoric bones, which palaeontologist Dr Roney (James Donald, from rarely seen sci-fi drama *The Net*, 1953) claims is an important discovery. Alerted by early reports of a

German rocket, Quatermass is just as curious about pre-war hauntings on old street Hobs Lane, a place "long notorious for weird happenings" linked via news archives to ancient history and folklore. Once it's excavated, the alien spaceship triggers hallucinations rooted in racial memory, soon recorded by Roney's brain monitor, for the Q labs to generate a video playback. With inherited psi faculties prompting a lemming styled appetite for self-destruction, and articulated fears about invasion by proxy ("We're the Martians now"), this is plainly a dark flip-side of 2001's evolutionary uplift. Eventually, speculative reasoning gives way to urban chaos with paranormal disaster, during which the military officers and politicians can only embrace their weakest rationalisations and blinkered certainties ("Your imagination is running wild" "Isn't yours?"); yet what emerges from the pit incites human re-enactments of extinct alien purges/mind-quakes across a burning London with spectral manifestations of a horned devil. Of course, the city is saved by quick-thinking application of basic physics. Later, ideas in Kneale's screenplay were an influence on Tobe Hooper's *Lifeforce*, John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness* and *Ghosts of Mars*, and not to mention bloody *Torchwood*. *Quatermass and the Pit* is one of the greatest British SF-horror movies. This HD edition offers a finely grained transfer and, quite obviously, its picture has never looked better. Optimum's Blu-ray disc extras showcase a batch of interviews (including Joe Dante), plus a commentary track by Baker and Kneale.

We have 5 Blu-rays to give away. Use QUATERMASS as your subject line.

WAREHOUSE 13 – SEASON TWO

(DVD, 19 September) has Secret Service agents, sensible Myka and clowning Pete, still working security detail for bag-and-tag jobs – "containment of threats to the planet" – in a more fanciful variation of *X-Files* mysteries. Clarke's "indistinguishable from magic" law applies often, especially in places like that shifting antigravity maze of the Escher vault. There are phantasmal energies on the loose. There are missing artefacts of weird power ("Hey, put that back! That's the original can of worms."). When super-tech fails, it's good to know that 'emergency repair procedure #1' usually gets any old glitchy gizmo working properly again. The warehouse stores inventory of amazement based on historical trivia or inspired by mythology. Last minute solutions to hazards always trip over 'uh-oh' moments in a first-time-for-everything necessity, while our mismatched heroes make it up as they go along. With gadgets including tin 'Farnsworth' b&w videophones and 'Tesla' ray-guns, Pete and Myka are still guided by US gov overseer/WH-13 caretaker Mrs Frederic (C.C.H. Pounder) and ops chief Artie (Saul Rubinek), and often helped by self-confessed 'freakazoid' Claudia, resident computer programmer who starts her apprenticeship as field agent. That escaped bad guy from season one defrosts British agent Helena (Jamie Murray), H.G. Wells' sister – real author of her famous brother's SF novels! Lindsay Wagner plays Dr Calder, WH-13's physician. Episode 13.1 features geek Fargo (Neil Grayston) from TV show *Eureka*, and guest stars genre veteran René Auberjonois as Hugo, a nutty genius with dementia and a virtual AI counterpart that dates back to the 1970s. Another recurring character is federal agent Logan (Tia Carrere). In the most action-packed storyline, *Buried* goes Indiana Jones (with Ms H.G. Wells in Lara Croft shorts) for an Egyptian mission to where the lost Alexandria WH-2 has been rediscovered. *Merge With Caution* offers lively body-swap comedy for Pete and Myka, while finale *Reset* has fantastical WMD apocalypse threatened by 'evil' Helena Wells, bitterly disappointed (an epiphany of despair?) that all great opportunities for a highly anticipated 21st century utopia have been wasted. As the main theme of *WH-13* is suppressed knowledge and shelved innovations, the wicked lady Wells actually has a point. Would starting a new Ice Age radically improve future prospects for this beleaguered world, though?



There was a time when it was quite safe to watch any low-budget horror without fear of being grossly insulted by the quality of genre product. Even during the video era, it was rare to find material so bad that it wasn't in the least bit 'good'. That time's gone. Chemical Burn fills a niche market for the lowest of low-grade DVD churn, with titles like *The Eleventh Aggression*, *Idol of Evil*, *Paranormal Haunting: The Curse of the Blue Moon Inn*, *Fast Zombies With Guns*, and now **MUCKMAN** (DVD, 20 September), the 13th video directed by Brett Piper, maker of demented trash movies such as *Bite Me!*, delirious mayhem of *Bacterium*, poisoned house mania *Drainiac!*, the anthology styled *Shock-O-Rama*, and the irresistibly titled *A Nymphoid Barbarian in Dinosaur Hell*. Set in the backwoods of Pennsylvania, this farce about a TV exposé is a big soup of improbabilities. The stinky Muckman is a legendary Bigfoot/Swamp Thing combo, targeted by a bogus 'Creature Hunter' TV show that's fronted by busty presenter Asia (Anju McIntyre, alias soft-porn star A.J. Kahn), a haughty media princess who thinks her 'career' is the story here. As local guides for this mythical monster quest, resident rednecks are familiar stereotype cretins: "We ain't no Cretans, we're American as you are." A hatched egg produces a squid thing which escapes into the TV crew's camping van. Watch bikini sideshow footage of a catfight in the river. See campfire bonding via toxic moonshine brew. Once the faked Muckman is exposed, the real menace appears and slasher jokes begin. RV driver Billie (Alison Whitney, easily the coolest performer here) is true heroine whose 'Hoax Busters' detective job lifts the lid on a cynical scam. Of course, she's rescued from death by rubbery Mucky, adding a Beauty & Beast angle to rural monster movie template. There's much blank-faced acting, but enough comic flourishes (including some delightfully cheesy stop-motion animation for the 'Nessie' sequence) to leaven duller scenes made from cliché concentrate. Contains nuttiness...

When old shockumentary movies were rediscovered by video fans back in the 1980s, a revival of mondo cinema contributed something scandalous to the groundbreaking developments in modern horror but, in off-shoots like the new Italian cannibal flicks, storytelling was (obviously) neglected in favour of ultimately boring snuff-video gore. Clearly, the currently fading cycle of 'torture porn' owes a debt to mondo, but I'm not convinced either adds any value to horror. Ruggero Deodato's still controversial video nasty **CANNIBAL HOLOCAUST** (1980) is released on Blu-ray 26 September, including a new 'director's edit' which reins back on the original version's animal cruelties and slaughter. In the 'green inferno' of Amazon jungles, an alleged documentary crew who were searching for a primitive 'tree people' tribe are reported MIA but helpfully leave behind a 'realistic' film of their supposedly horrific fate. What begins as cinéma vérité version of *National Geographic* style nudity/tribalism – that "no white man ever saw before" – soon dissolves into a festering mess. Filmed in the wake of *Apocalypse Now*, this purports to document a journey back to the Stone Age, not descent into a heart of darkness. No sincerity of purpose as 'entertainment' or any anthropological concerns is evident. *Cannibal Holocaust* is just insipidly grotesque exploitation with its 'staged reality' inspired by a mondo craze as its only selling point. For the ending, a screening booth audience sit uncomfortably watching the final scenes of raw footage, all looking slightly bemused. As well they might. Disgust is a necessary element of 'genuine' modern horror, but it is one colour of a richer palette, only part of the grander design. Here, there's no big picture to see, only feeble attempts to shock and appal. So, unlike Frankenstein's monster, this movie is considerably less than the sum of its parts. The main feature's hi-def image quality is fairly impressive though.



We'd be lucky to see one US blockbuster movie in any five-year period that promises more than is shown by its trailer. Certainly, I think we cannot honestly expect any big surprises nowadays. For hard-SF, the Japanese have often led the way with serious anime such as *Wings of Honneamise*, *Grey: Digital Target*, *Patlabor*, *Ghost in the Shell*, etc. From the director of sci-fi anime *Vexille* (*Black Static* #7) and live-action *Ichii* (2008 remake of chambara franchise *Zatoichi*), feature anthology **2001 NIGHTS** (aka: *Fumihiko Sori's TO*) arrives on Blu-ray/DVD, 26 September. This adapts a pair of tales from SF manga *2001 Nights*, a sprawling future history series (some of which I recall reading about twenty years ago). *Elliptical Orbit* starts aboard *Midnight Bazooka*, a space station launching shipping containers from Earth to Moon. When a starship, returning from Alpha Centauri with its valuable cargo of "liquefied protons", docks at the Earth orbit platform, terrorists hijack the catapult station and plan to destroy

the lunar colony. This is heavy techno futurism, with its spacer heroes haunted by social estrangement side-effects of time dilation and hyper-sleep. It develops quickly into a hard-SF action thriller that is rather unexceptional but still reasonably enjoyable, and should please fans of genre films like *Outland*, *2010*, and the recent *Cargo*. Animated characters are not photo-real but comprised of very good 3D CGI for basic OVA work. *Symbiotic Planet* leaps ahead to when a 22nd century interstellar colonisation is well in progress. There's a young couple on different survey teams upon an alien world, of strange life forms occupying co-op ecosystem niches, where the terraforming scheme threatens the balance of nature. UN mediators hope to settle the differences between Eurasian and American colonies but, when the fungal infection impacts negotiations, military leaders on both sides stir up trouble, provoking a conflict. With the bombers flying and warheads in launch position, only alien spores and smart balloons can save the day from MADness. Again, this is likeable trad space opera despite its lack of 21st century sci-fi invention. There's just enough surface tension to walk on, but a filleted plot is fishy and gutless. Its restless changes are only like that of shifting limbs during a sleepless night. With other, perhaps better/updated stories and a sharper direction for cutting-edge SF, this has the potential to be a remarkable franchise of short films. Top genre jutsu!

USED CLUMPAGE

Rene Perez's weird western *The Dead and the Damned* is released in UK on DVD (1 August) as **COWBOYS & ZOMBIES**, presumably to cash in on the big-budget similarity of *Cowboys & Aliens*. There are middling stereotypes of bounty hunter heroes on trail of bounty for a rogue injun brave, while a glowing meteor found by gold prospectors has CGI spores infecting Whiskeytown folk with green goo makeup. Undead antics ensue – blind zombie, stupid zombie, running/jumping stuntman zombie – lacking suspense or imagination. Cheap gore and gratuitous topless scenes fail to enliven a checklist of cross-genre clichés, while shoddy production standards are often comically poor, but the movie is never funny. Glasgow Phillips' farce *Undead or Alive* had a lot more wit.

"The communists stole my dog. So he couldn't bark when the gypsies came." **STRIGOI** (DVD, 22 August) is a dish of Romanian vampire folklore lightly garnished with black comedy. It begins with a double-murder by the conspiracy of superstitious townsfolk, before prodigal son and medical student Vlad returns home from Italy and becomes suspicious of the locals' coffin-side vigil/drinking wake, to ensure a village drunkard is ready for burial. There's a homicidal priest and a corrupt mayor, and the voracious appetites of undead victims keep one housewife busy in her kitchen supplying meals for nonstop feasting. Essentially, this is a slow moving detective story that verges on tedium, as heroic Vlad investigates a widower's mysterious death to find a motive (theft of land?). Cutting out hearts and bodily evidence of spreading disease provides the main graphic horrors. *Strigoi* has moments of wry humour and some ghoully wit but its elements of genre farce are greatly subdued. This is amusing but never actually funny.

Two young couples break into a scrap yard hoping to find spare parts for their broken down car. When one of the girls is shot, her boyfriend runs to the local sheriff's office, but, on returning to the crime scene with police and medics, there's no sign (at first!) of a wounded girlfriend, or the young hero's other pals. What's all this got to do with news reports of an escaped serial killer? **WRECKAGE** (DVD, 22 August) is directed by John Asher (*Kounterfeit*), and is so bad it's impossible to take seriously

– although I doubt we're really supposed to. A massacre is apparent as bodies start to pile up, but incompetent scripting, hysterical or cretinous acting, and slack direction result in a rubbish film with a most apt title!

Adam Green's black comedy slasher *Hatchet* was reviewed in *Black Static* #3. Now, swamp terror Victor Crowley (genre stuntman Kane Hodder) returns in **HATCHET II** (Blu-ray/DVD, 29 August), continuing from where the first dreary movie ended, with Louisiana tour boat survivor/heroine Marybeth (scream queen candidate Danielle Harris, replacing Tamara Feldman, who's retreated into TV work) recovering from Crowley's attacks. Before long, she's listening to Tony Todd, in Rev. Zombie's voodoo shop, narrating the origin story of deformed and cursed boy Vic, antagonist of grisly 'humour' about slaughtered gator hunters/Cajun fishermen, so that she's all back-storied up and ready for going back into Crowley's territory with a hunting party of rednecks. This is not even slightly amusing. It's just silly and mostly incompetent filmmaking made in genre of mouldy popcorn horror. Its dialogue is so awful that it prompts regular cringes and fast-forward button twitches whenever another dismal stereotype character or cliché appears – which is frequently. Decapitation gags pile up like waste in a broken toilet. "Don't be a fool!" Please, save yourself. Bury the hatchet; misfile this sequel under D for dud.

A variety of 1980s' horror flicks show modern genre concerns in development. While a few neglected classics may deserve a 21st century reviewing, a great many second or third rate productions that are now being exhumed have little to offer discerning fans, but are simply examples of exploitation cinema history created in that era of the video boom. John A. Russo's **MIDNIGHT** (DVD, 29 August) sees hitchhiker Nancy (Melanie Verlin, in her only film) on the run from abusive step-dad Bert (Hollywood tough guy Lawrence Tierney), surviving road-trip antics only to end up as a kidnap victim, caged for a ceremonial Easter sacrifice by devil worshippers. It's *Race with the Devil* meets *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, yet some unsavoury racism helps distinguish this from numerous other cult slashers. Tom Savini supplies the creative splatter effects, and John Amplas (*Martin*) plays one of the Satanist maniacs. Since co-writing *Night*

of the *Living Dead*, Russo's career has been quite spotty at best. He directed sequel *Midnight 2* (1993), and new project 'Escape of the Living Dead' is reportedly in pre-production.



Gaspard plunges unthinkingly into cyber-noir of online game 'Black Hole', bewitched by suicidal blonde Audrey (Louise Bourgoin, superb in *Extraordinary Adventures of Adèle Blanc-Sec*) while forsaking steady girlfriend Marion. While both of thoughtless Gaspard's actual relationships are breaking up, it appears that Gaspard's false liaison with Internet femme fatale 'Sam' is leading him into ultimate danger. **BLACK HEAVEN** (DVD, 5 September), directed by Gilles Marchand (*Who Killed Bambi?*), is partly teen romance, partly a Hitchcockian mystery thriller of amateur detective work, and partly a brooding urban drama of utterly destructive sexual obsession. There's cutting-edge authenticity in the b&w CGI animation for an exclusive virtual nightclub, while online anonymity for gaming avatars veils obvious deceit, which the plot segues from playful whimsy to subversively disturbing once all the cruel implications of mistaken identity are revealed. Intriguing, with some metaphysical philosophy which avoids intellectual smugness and much existential angst concerning the misuse of technology, this offers plenty of chills as its main characters seem determined to discover a life after death.

From the maker of *Monster Island* (1981), *Slugs* (1988), *The Rift* (1990), and *Cthulhu Mansion* (1992), here's a re-release of *Mil gritos tiene la noche* (1982), better known as **PIECES** (DVD, 5 September), Spanish splatter by director Juan Piquer Simón. This is another cult exploitation flick exhumed from the VHS graveyard. Campy humour is used to mitigate a nasty plot as Boston maniac kills university girls, saving body parts for the human jigsaw that's a handiwork recreation of his first victim: yes, his mother, in homage to

Psycho. Christopher George (*City of the Living Dead*, *Grizzly*, *Day of the Animals*) plays the detective. Paul Smith (*Dune*, *Popeye*, *Crimewave*) throws his weight about in a red herring capacity. Lynda Day (*Mission: Impossible* blonde in the 1970s) is undercover as the campus tennis coach. There's gratuitous aerobics, terrible acting by a support cast, and an object lesson: never get into a lift with a man carrying a chainsaw. After our Frankenstein wannabe gets his comeuppance, that supernatural twist ending is staggeringly pointless!

From writer-director Seiji Chiba, the maker of *Alien vs. Ninja* (see *Interzone* #233), *The Kunoichi: Ninja Girl* is released on DVD (5 September) as **ROGUE NINJA** and it's another vehicle for talented martial artist Rina Takeda, who also stars in other recent kung fu flicks like Fuyuhiko Nishi's *High-Kick Girl*, and Yoshikatsu Kimura's *Karate Girl*, and she appears opposite Ray Park in Nelson Shin's *Future Fighters*, due next year. It's a safe bet that Takeda is one of the fast-rising Japanese action starlets as she carries this micro-budget swordplay drama with assured screen presence as vengeful Ukagami, reacting to 16th century feuds and repulsive misogyny from the leaders of 'lesser ninjas'. Sadly, unlike Chiba's *AVN*, this earlier production is a straightforward chambara, lacking any outré fantasy elements and without the budget for antigravity wirework or many decapitations and severed limbs that might appeal to horror fans.

British suspense thriller **THE HOLDING** (DVD, 12 September) appropriates its images of rural horror and sex menace from *Straw Dogs* (now remade in USA by Rod Lurie), and harvests brooding domestic atmosphere from *The Stepfather*. Single mum Cassie struggles to run her farmstead while supporting two daughters. Cass thinks that she's killed her abusive husband Dean, but itinerant stranger Aden (note anagram!) slowly gains control of the household while the lonely 'widow' fends off predatory neighbour lummox and the deluge of overdue bills. Well produced and with good performances, Susan Jacobson's debut feature benefits from Peak District scenery, but its basic plot is tiredly predictable at every twist and turn, and all of its carefully wrought intensity in early sequences is jettisoned in favour of a crudely violent/explosive finale, which seems like a sop to win over fans of gritty countryside shockers.



The debut feature directed by Olivier Abbou, French-Canadian horror **TERRITORIES** (aka: *Checkpoint*) is released on DVD (12 September). While driving along back roads for a US border crossing, a carload of young Americans are waylaid by bogus customs guards in the deep woods. An outdoor strip/cavity search leads to orange jumpsuits/hooded bondage and nights spent locked in cages in the forest, where callous villains are practising videoed interrogations in their private homemade Gitmo. Low-budget grunge, overused jittery camerawork, simplistic screenwriting, uninventive direction, all combine with issues of liberal politics versus fascist brutality themes to render this grotesque nonsense almost unwatchable after its palpably tense beginning. Brittle or amateurish performances of redneck psychopathy, with insane patriotism apparently fuelled by paranoia since 11th September 2001, might have made this a tolerably cult-worthy item five years ago. Now, it only seems like a lame leap onto the torture-porn bandwagon. A secondary tale concerning a sleazy private eye (haunted by failure), on a missing person case, dominates later scenes but it's a ham-fisted digression. Really, this filmmaker has nothing (original) to declare.

THE ROOMMATE (Blu-ray/DVD, 12 September) stars Leighton Meester, teen queen of TV's *Gossip Girl*, as college student Rebecca, a fixated rich brat off her meds, going mental on cue while obsessing about fashionista hopeful Sara (Minka Kelly, co-star in TV's reboot of *Charlie's Angels*). Cam Gigandet (*Pandorum*, *Burlesque*, *Priest*) plays Sara's understanding boyfriend, a Ken to Kelly's brunette Barbie. Billy Zane camps it up as the design school prof, a lech with outfits. Of course, it's all a clichéd version of *Single White Female*, like a TV movie production – insufferably bland as any perfume advert. Wholly sanitised psycho antics (Rebecca puts a kitten into a laundry machine but we never see her turn the washer on), without quality performances from the lead

actresses (Kelly and Meester are laughably weak stereotypes), means this is much too restrained to qualify as a thriller for grown-ups, let alone fit the bill as horror shocker.

SACRED BLACKSMITH – SEASON

ONE (DVD, 19 September) is new anime directed by Masamitsu Hidaka, co-creator of *Pokémon* on TV (1997–2002). This delivers comedy adventure in a faux historical scenario. "Hopelessly nice" Cecily, a feisty but incapable wannabe knight, continues her family's tradition of proudly defending her hometown from evil. Extremely capable yet apathetic/arrogant Luke is a reluctant hero, a gifted metalworker using his magical forge to create katana blades. They deal with bear-like golems, fight Lovecraftian monsters of icy venom, and guard the princess who luckily changes into a demon sword when required. Although killing puppet-people infected with parasitic bugs adds some icky grue appeal, this is mostly lightweight and cutesy, lapsing into a campy coming-of-age rom-com formula too frequently, whenever weird creatures produced by a 'devil's contract' threaten to be frightening or mildly horrific.

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

– **SEASON 8** motion comic (DVD, 3 October) is only a cash-in which extends the narrative of Joss Whedon's extraordinarily popular *Buffy* series (1997–2003). With a writing team led by Joss Whedon and Jane Espenson, it's only to be expected that voiceover narration and dialogues for Scooby gangs of slayers is generally quite witty, but actual production values here are iffy and bitty. Indeed, it has to be said that 'motion comics' are a rather curious development. Clearly not full-animation, but rarely just static artwork in a slideshow presentation either, its images are vaguely reminiscent of superlative nursery pop-up picture storybooks. Viewed as a movie it's as cramped/ineffective as indoor cavalry. As multimedia, the odd format seems a dead end creatively. Once the novelty value wears off (after about five or ten minutes), it's hard viewing, often worse than watching those annoying/uninteresting 'animatics' that digital storyboard artists produce as crude previews for CGI effects to impress nobody in particular. It's difficult to weigh up any merits when any content is so hampered by presentation, but the shapeless offering looks as lightweight as empty speech balloons or blank thought bubbles.

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